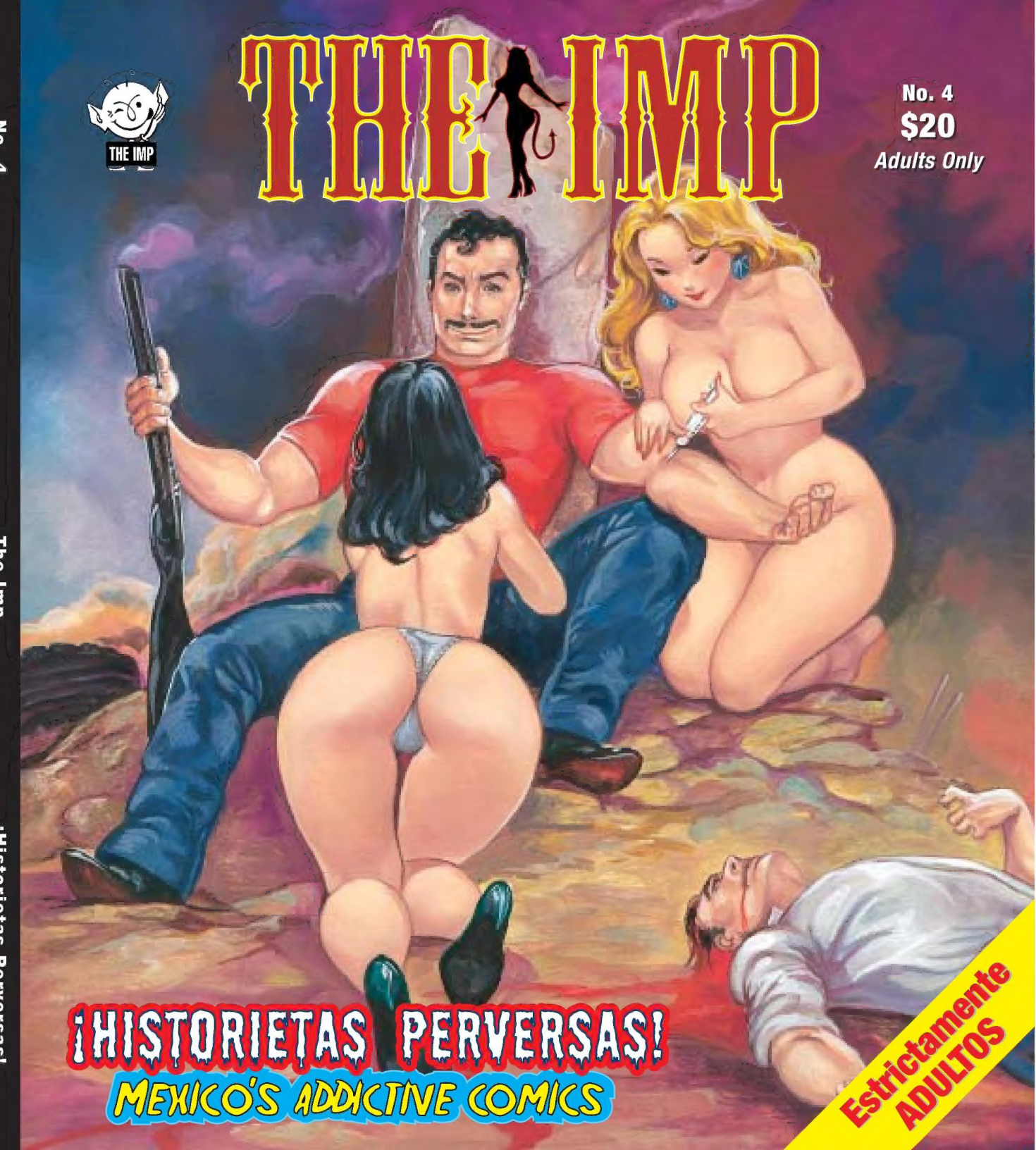
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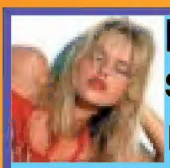

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THE IMP, NUMBER 4

HISTORIETAS PERVERSAS

Mexico's Perverse "Little Histories"

DANIEL K. RAEBURN
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Thanks to...

Ernesto Priego, obviously, for guiding me to the heart of the Mexican comic book industry. Ernesto was my *lengua,* but he ain't no *Malinchista.*

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Gregory Gransden, for making his film about historietas and sharing it and much more with me. E-mail Greg at *ggransden@canada.com.*

Eli Bishop, for slaving cheerfully over a passel of historietas and articles from the Mexican press in order to translate phrases like *"¡Pus vete a ver a Doña Manuela!"* into English.

Jessica Abel & Matt Madden, for collecting at least twenty pounds of comics and the massive *Puros Cuentos* books and mailing them to me.

Diamonds Mulcahey, for an honest, ruthless edit.

Rebekah Wiest, for outfitting this issue in all the right colors (and the wrong colors, as needed).

At a recent symposium on these comics hosted by Harvard University, professor Ana Merino denounced me and the essay you are about to read. In Merino's opinion these comics should remain beneath notice, and she said that I was like an American tourist who vacations in her homeland of Spain and gets excited because Spanish women sunbathe topless. At the cocktail reception following her performance, Merino amplified her diatribe by standing on top of my feet, pinching my neck and wagging her finger at me while our host, Tom Devlin, urged her to please lower her voice.

Of course, none of the Mexicans at this symposium were irate—they've seen these comics a zillion times before—but I anticipate even more gratifying cultural exchanges with you, dear Reader. So please, keep those cards and letters coming.

THE IMP NO. 4

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THIS BOOKLET IS ABOUT Mexican comic books, or *historietas*. In particular, it is about a nasty new breed of "little history" or "little story" that is hell bent on making money, and perhaps an art, out of cynicism and perversity. I say this right up front because there are many things this booklet is not about, and I do not want to disappoint readers who hope for something different. This booklet is not about good Mexican comics. There are tons of good Mexican comics, but other people have already written about them, and I will point you to their books. This booklet is about bad Mexican comics. It is about the artists who create them, the tycoons who publish them, and the government's attempts to stop them. It is about what was once the biggest comic book industry on earth, now in its death throes, trying desperately to re-entice millions of readers it has surely lost forever.

* The reprobate at top left is the leering narrator of EJEA's comic, *La Vida Excitante y Brutal.* Unfortunately the artist is uncredited.

Ten or fifteen years ago Mexico was the biggest per capita producer and consumer of comic books in the world. Most historietas were more right-minded then. When they revealed a little leg or blood, it was only to show wrongs that would be righted in the end. The tear-streaked girl next door made an honest man out of her insouciant seducer, the slave-owning Texans got their asses kicked at the Alamo, and the Indians got at least some of their land back. These traditional historietas were so popular that each copy sold was re-sold, rented, or borrowed an average of 12 times, giving Mexico the flabbergasting circulation of over 250 million comic books every month.[1]

Then came freer trade with the outside world. Then came cosmopolitanism. Then came television, Hollywood movies, and superheroes. Japanese comics, or *manga,* followed. Today Mexicans still read comic books but they are engrossed less by their own historietas and more by Wolverine's hairy breasts and an invasion of moon-eyed schoolgirls who fornicate with insects. The word on homemade Mexican comics is glum: in his 1999 documentary, *The Dark Underworld of Mexico's Little Stories,* the Canadian journalist Gregory Gransden estimated that historieta circulation has plunged to no more than twenty million per month.[2] What was once Mexico's most vigorous and popular medium of mass communication is now on life support. Of course, nobody cares. Comic books are the least of Mexico's worries.

[1] The per capita assertion comes from Adriana Malvido, "Actualidades: La industria de la historieta Mexicana, o, el floreciente negocio de las emociones," *Revista Mexicana de Comunicación,* Sep.–Oct. 1989. The 12 readings per issue were determined in field research conducted by Armando Bartra, the art anthropologist and preëminent Mexican comics historian, cited in Harold E. Hinds and Charles M. Tatum, *Not Just for Children: The Mexican Comic Book in the Late 1960s and 1970s,* Greenwood Press, 1992, p. 6. Hinds and Tatum's sources for this quarter-billion figure are derived from their own fieldwork conducted in the 1970s and early 1980s as well as a half dozen print sources also referenced on page 6 of their book.

[2] Gregory Gransden, "The Dark Underworld of Mexico's Little Stories," *Un Canadien à México,* Canadian Broadcasting Company, 1999. The *Village Voice* noted that historietas are widely available in Central and North America, doubling that figure to 40 million per week. Alex Giardino, "Strip Tease: Mexico's Softcore Comics Craze," *Voice Literary Supplement,* Feb.–Mar. 1999, p. 19.

But Mexican comic book publishers worry. About seven years ago they started making historietas that give the foreign competition—and guardians of civic virtue—something to worry about as well. Now publishers demand that artists and writers pack their comics with guns, drugs, and buns. Fathers screw daughters, mothers hump their daughter's boyfriends, and daughters steal their mother's girlfriends. Boys bugger other boys while the adults shoot, stab, rob, and rape each other. People cheat other people and people eat other people. Even the nuns have grown horns and acquired new habits. Mexicans groaned when I told them I was writing about these new historietas, and nobody was more anguished than the people who have to make them. The cartoonists I talked to bemoaned that nothing is sacred anymore.

"Mexico is the biggest producer and consumer, per capita, of comic books in the entire world."

—Adriana Malvido, 'Revista Mexicana de Comunicación,' 1989

Nothing but circulation, that is. The niche market for these shameless comics proved to be a mass market. The most porny titles now move nearly one-half million copies every week.[3] Like their traditional forebears, these historietas sell like the proverbial hot tamale on every corner. If you are on the street in Mexico City somewhere in your field of vision is at least one of these comics. They are racked at every newspaper stand, spread-eagled atop toilet tank lids, and peeking out of passersby's pockets. Brand-new, one costs about fifty cents; used, a dime. These little stories may appear to be worthless, but they add up to a lot of change.

Because they are everywhere, they can paradoxically seem invisible. Almost every Mexican I met claimed that he or she didn't know what I was talking about. So I would point one out to her, whereupon she would roll her eyes and say, Oh, you mean *basura.* You mean trash. Like trash, these comics are an integral part of the cityscape that is politely ignored. Like trash, these comics do not merit a proper name.

It is tempting to name them after the type of guy who reads them. This guy is generally called a *naco.* Naco is a slur best translated as *white trash* mixed with a little bit of *nigger.* It is not to be confused with *mestizo.* Although all nacos are mestizo, not all mestizos are nacos. If you have both Indian and European blood you are mestizo. You are "mixed." You are a descendant of Martín, that first coppery Mexican born to the Indian mother, Malinche, and Hernán Cortés, the white man who raped her. If you are mestizo you are probably poor and you are not alone. People like you make up 70 to 80 percent of the Mexican population. The mestizo is the quintessential Mexican, and being mestizo is something to be proud of. But a naco is not supposed to have pride. A naco is a new kind of mestizo, an urban mestizo who has no hope, no taste, and most important, no class. This is the crucial distinction made by Carlos Monsiváis, Mexico's *numero uno* public intellectual, when he said that in the eyes of the Mexican, the mestizo is mythical, but the naco is typical.[4]

The naco is imagined to be ugly, uneducated, and addicted to sniffing flammable solvents. He is supposed to rob you, rape your wife, and slit your throat just for hyena laughs. You will know him by his death metal tee shirt and his soccer rocker haircut. You will recognize him immediately because he is an Americanized

3 In 1998 a publishing trade magazine reported that sales of *Delmónico's Erotika* were at 180,000 copies per week, while *Las Chambeadoras (The Hard-Working Girls)* and *Bellas de Noche (Beauties of the Night)* each sold a respectable 120,000 copies. By January of 2001 *La Jornada* reported that sales of *The Hard-Working Girls* were up to 300,000 per week and *Erotika* was at 400,000 copies. Now that's progress! These figures were reported in Francisco González V., "Los mexicanos prefieren los cómicos a los libros," *Periodico Publico,* Nov. 13, 1998, and José de Jesús Fajardo, "¿Qué leemos los mexicanos?" *Periodico Publico,* Nov. 29, 1998, as well as in Angel Vargas and Carlos Paul III, "Los tirajes más altos en el país contienen chatarra," *La Jornada,* Jan. 17, 2001.

4 Carlos Monsiváis and John Kraniauskas, translator, *Mexican Postcards,* Verso, 1997, p. 51. Monsiváis reads comics, which might explain his occasional cameo in historietas. In an issue of *Perverse Souls,* Monsi, as he is popularly known, gets mugged by three thugs outside of an ATM. In an issue of *The Plumed Serpent* Monsi gasps at a saucy historieta—*The Hard-Working Girls*—and exclaims, "Your children read this magazine?" See page 86 of this issue. Credit for Monsi's cameo goes to Juan José Sotelo, better known as J.J. Sotelo, the thinking man's historieta writer.

IMP-5

La Ley del Revolver, *No. 179, Apr. 8, 1998. ©Editorial Mango. Drawn by Rafael Gallur, painted by Rey.*

La Ley de la Calle, *No. 13, May 13, 1998. ©Editorial EJEA. Drawn by Pegaso, painted by Guillermo Peimbert.*

Mexican, a hybrid both countries can hate equally. The specter of the naco keeps the Orange County country club potentate awake late at night, a loaded gun by his king-size bed. The lurking naco is the reason every middle-class home in Mexico City bristles with barbed wire and glass spikes. Nobody trusts the naco. If you are a naco, you are *chingada.* You are fucked. And because you're already fucked, you figure, Fuck it. Fuck everybody. Fuck everything. Apparently, this is the naco philosophy. Apparently, this is the philosophy behind these comics.

> **"Mexico has earned well the title of 'the worst comics in the world.'"**
>
> —Rius, 'La Vida de Cuadritos'

The most typical of these new historietas is *¡Así Soy! ¿Y Que?* Or, *That's Me! So What?*[5] This title is over ten years old, making it the elder statesman of the young hellions. The *So What?* mascot is an icon of naco-ness: a skinny, teenage imp who clenches his fists and pumps his pelvis at the reader. He is young, he is cheesy, and he is horny. He is a *chilango,* a Mexico City Mexican. He is the guy indignant Mexican citizens have in mind when they mutter, "Keep Mexico beautiful. Kill a chilango." With the same chutzpah as *So What?,* some nacos and chilangos have appropriated these slurs,[6] making them into terms of empowerment. Calling these comics *historietas nacas* or *historietas chilangas* is not mean enough to capture the contempt in which most Mexicans hold them. A meaner term is required, one that connotes the comic and its reader are beneath contempt. Emilio Azcárraga Milmo, the late poobah of the Televisa media empire, provided such a term. When a reporter asked Azcárraga why he produced such awful trash for his television audience, Azcárraga offhandedly replied that his viewers were merely *los jodidos.*

"*Jodido* is a highly derogatory, idiomatic adjective or adjectival noun," Ernesto Priego told me in the first of our interviews. Ernesto teaches English literature and comics at the National University of Mexico. "It means very poor, economically or in quality. Or, simply, without any money, job, or education."

I asked Alexandra Giardino, a Yankee writer who lived in Mexico City for years, about Ernesto's definition of *los jodidos.* "He's being polite," Alex said. "That is so Mexican. God, I love it." An almost homesick smile rose and faded from her face. "It means 'the fucked.' That's what *los jodidos* means, literally: the fucked."

So: *Historietas jodidas* are fucked-up little stories meant to be read by fucked-up and fucked-over people. The fucked-up thing is, these comics are right on the money. The problem is how to get this money into the hands of the artists and writers who deserve it. That is why I dedicate this issue with great respect, admiration, and affection to the *historietistas,* to the Mexican cartoonists who work so hard yet made time to give me so much. Zenaido, Bazaldúa, and Silva—this one is for you, and for all of your comrades at the drawing board. You deserve more.

—El Monstruo—

The best English sobriquet for these comics is one that Alex coined in her article about them: the *ghetto libretto.*[7] Millions and millions of los jodidos populate Mexico City, the world's largest city. They live inside tiny, often primitive apartments and homes. Their term for this cramped city life is *la vida de cuadritos*—literally, life lived inside little boxes. It is apartment life, life without enough living room to keep any secrets from your neighbors. In its popular, idiomatic sense,

5 Literally, the title translates as, "That's the Way I Am! So What?" But I feel "That's Me!" more accurately captures the colloquial zip.

6 Ernesto Priego told me this: "In the 1980s an art show opened in Tepito, a lower-class, fairly dangerous neighborhood, roughly equivalent to the Bronx or Brixton. The show was called 'Tepito: Arte Acá.' The irony lies in the word *acá,* which literally means 'here,' but idiomatically means 'snob.' About the same time, famed indie Mex-rock band Botellita de Jerez released their album, *Naco es Chido (Naco Is Cool),* and soon after an artistic movement called Arte Naco arose. Arte Naco consisted mostly of educated, urban, middle- and upper-class artists who used traditionally underrated Mexican popular art and folklore—wrestling and historietas, for example—in highbrow museums and galleries. Considering the Mexican social context, all of it was very controversial."

7 Giardino, "Strip Tease."

la vida de cuadritos means 'the hard life.' When you say, *"Me hagan la vida de cuadritos,"* you mean that The Man is keeping you down and boxing you in. The boxed panels of these comics also contain these people's lives. It is a life of crime, especially for the unfortunate and the innocent. Crime is the tyrant that rules Mexico City. Crime, along with the city's immense, sprawling size, is why Mexicans commonly refer to Mexico City as *el Monstruo*—the Monster—in the same way that we say the Big Apple or the Windy City. Crime is the reason why ghetto librettos are crime comics, and their outrageous depiction of crime is why many people think the comics themselves are a crime. In fact, these comics *are* a crime. They break every single law in Mexico's ultra-strict comics code.

"Historietas are sensational, simplistic, high-handedly moral, hackneyed, treacle-coated, apolitical fantasies complete with skin whiteners and surgical enhancement."

—Kurt Hollander, 'Poliester'

The archetypical ghetto libretto reveals in 80 graphic pages what happens when an innocent nymph from the countryside migrates to the Monster. She meets a man who wears an earring, goatee, or ponytail—who is *el Diablo* incarnate—and the reader is subjected to page after page of ejaculating oaths, blood, and spittle. When the gunsmoke clears, the narrator says, See? Don't make the mistake she made. The last panel shows the devil shoved into a jail cell and surrounded by pop-eyed, drooling members of the same sex who close in while the guard looks away. Official justice is served raw, with a sermon on the side and a final shriek of *¡Aaay!* Ghetto librettos feed the id's insatiable appetite for transgression, but they also satisfy the superego and leave the status quo unchallenged. These comics subvert everything and threaten nothing.

In spite of this incongruity, or perhaps because of it, the Mexican campaign against historietas wears on. And on. Conservatives hate them because they flaunt taboos so flagrantly. Liberals hate them because their messages are so conservative. To placate both sides, the Mexican government made salacious historietas totally illegal, then created an agency to enforce the laws against them. Still the little stories arrive on the newsstand every week, and still millions and millions of people read them religiously. These illegal comics are unstoppable. They are the new Mexican mainstream and they have crossed the border into the United States. All the worst titles recently began sporting a U.S. cover price—one dollar each, cheap—and their sales here are growing every day.

One or two Yankee bluenoses have recently carped about these comics[8] but without one one-hundredth the wit or spleen shown by our southern neighbors, who have grown expert at trashing the damned things. A Mexico City arts magazine, *Poliester*, thundered, "Historietas are sensational, simplistic, high-handedly moral, hackneyed, treacle-coated, apolitical fantasies complete with skin whiteners and surgical enhancement."[9] *La Jornada Semanal* lamented, "The main features of this new phenomenon cramming the kiosks are misogyny, vulgarity, and puritanism."[10] Lorna Scott Fox really let fly in *La Vitrina,* a publication of the Mexican Cultural Institute. She said that Mexican comics make most educated readers want to throw up. "The historieta is pabulum for the stupid, the vulgar and the ignorant," she wrote. "It is crude, trite, dated, sexist, violent—and moralistic to boot."[11] In his history of historietas,

8 Due to increased Mexican immigration to the East Coast, a New Jersey distributor is already selling over 10,000 historietas per week. Marcia Biederman, "X-Rated Comic Books from Mexico Are Making Time Fly—On the Train," *New York,* Oct. 11, 1999, p. 20. Last year on Reformanet a flock of California librarians traded emails warning each other about the "fotonovelas" [sic] that had crept into their bilingual funnybook collections. These messages flew between Marge Fauver, librarian at the Santa Barbara Public Library, and Vicki Novak of the Maricopa Library. Oddly enough, the ladies agreed that *Una Historia, Una Vida* and several other fairly *picante* titles were "acceptable." They must not have the issue of *Una Historia* that I have, whose cover features a pregnant teenager mainlining heroin.

9 "That is to say," the author adds, "well within the genre of Mexican Realism." So true. Kurt Hollander, "Historietas de la vida real," *Poliester,* vol. 2, No. 6, summer 1993, pp. 14–17.

10 Luis Tovar, "Sensaporno," *La Jornada Semanal,* Nov. 7, 1999.

11 Lorna Scott Fox, "The Way We Are," *La Vitrina,* Issue 6, Jul. 15, 1998. This is an on-line magazine: *lavitrina.com.*

¡HAY QUE PONERLA GRIFA CON UN BUEN ARPONAZO!
¿?
¡SALE! ¡JA, JA, JA!
Y DE ESE MODO...
¡TRANQUILA, MAMACITA! ¡NO TE MUEVAS, QUE NO TE VEO LA VENA Y PUEDO LASTIMARTE GACHO!
¡MMJMJMM!
AP-53

Almas Perversas, *No. 72, May 1, 1998. ©Editorial Mango. Written by Gami, drawn by Garmaleón, inked by Manuel Martínez García.*

Yo Confieso, No. 131, June 13, 2001. ©Editorial Toukán. Drawn by Félix Guzmán, painted by Antonio Santillán.

La Vida de Cuadritos, the famous Mexican cartoonist Eduardo del Rio, pen name Rius, delivered the bottom line. "Mexico has earned well the title of 'the worst comics in the world,'" Rius wrote. "The Mexican comic book—imbecilic, coarse, pretentious, and in the worst taste—is an insult to the 'eighth art.' In order to protect the mental health of the Mexican people, it deserves the guillotine and the firing squad."[12]

Such sentiments are precisely why a few of us hold these little soap operas so tightly to our heaving bosoms. Lorna Scott Fox's diatribe was just a prelude to her confession that she actually loves ghetto librettos. Ditto the author of the *Poliester* screed. Ernesto Priego loathes what the ghetto libretto is doing to his beloved comics medium, but he can't stop himself from buying them by the kilo. In her article about ghetto librettos, Alex Giardino called them "melodramatic," "saccharine," and "a big embarrassment"—yet she proudly displays her collection on her coffee table; in particular, an issue of *Beauties of the Night* whose cover showcases a woman with a toilet plunger stuck up her ass.

"The historieta is pabulum for the stupid, the vulgar and the ignorant. It is crude, trite, dated, sexist, violent—and moralistic to boot."

—Lorna Scott Fox, 'La Vitrina'

It is easy to see why Yankees like ghetto librettos. These comics are refreshingly terrible. They're kitsch, and when we give kitsch our wholehearted, unconditional love, it becomes Camp. I have pitched my tent squarely in Camp Ghetto Libretto, hence the booklet you now hold. But when I stop to think about what I am doing, I wince with an almost Catholic guilt. We're not talking about Cantinflas, the Charlie Chaplin of Mexico. We're talking about *bad* comics, bad art. We're in danger of doing what the French do when they lionize Jerry Lewis as the greatest American actor, celebrating an idjit in order to quietly maintain their smug sense of cultural superiority. And I recognize that the irony of irony, the Grand Irony, is that these comics' *lack* of irony is what makes them so, like, totally excellent.

"Mexican industrial comics do not want to be High Art," Ernesto told me. "They do not feel any guilt for being themselves." Right. That's why I ought to feel guilty about liking them. When the gringo hipster hears the words, "unironic culture," he reaches for his chain wallet. That's me.

My Confession

The full truth is that my love for the ghetto libretto is rooted in something deeper than kitsch. I do take these melodramatic stories personally, if not always seriously, and so should you. But I am getting ahead of my own moral. Let me start at the beginning. On the second day of 1997 I was inside a luxury hotel in Zihuatanejo, Mexico, lying naked on a king-size bed strewn with magenta flower blossoms. In my right hand I held a cold can of beer. In my left hand I held the first ghetto libretto I had ever seen. A beautiful, naked, 25-year old woman squeezed against me, hanging on my every word as I read the comic aloud to her. Understand that she was hanging on to more than just my words.

I came to this paradise through a chain of appropriately historieta-like events, largely instigated by the deeds of one man. I still love this man, and because of this and any unexpired statutes of limitations, I owe him the benefit of anonymity. Let's call him the Captain, after his little houseboat in Sausalito. In the early 1960s the Captain was the teenage son of a Los Angeles doctor. One day little Cap stole a prescription pad from his dad's office and forged himself several prescriptions for LSD, which was still legal at the time. Cap sold the finagled tabs and bought a one-way ticket to the Hawaiian Islands.

To this day, spurred by tequila and a little perverse pride, the Captain will insist that he single-handedly brought the drug trade to Hawaii. By day, he taught surfing to well-oiled and well-heeled vacationers from the mainland. At night, he entertained gaggles of grateful

[12] Rius, *La Vida de Cuadritos: Breve Guía de la Historieta,* Grijalbo, 1983, pp. 97–98.

ladies by hand-feeding them his drugs. Whatever drugs he did not sell personally he shipped back to the mainland via some bell-bottomed mates of his in the then-clueless United States Navy. Eventually the Captain worked his way up to the position of "tour manager," i.e., chief drug procurement officer, for the musical *Hair,* then touring the Pacific.

One night the Captain met a girl at a cast party. This girl was the wealthy, teenage daughter of a local sugar patriarch, and she was nothing but Trouble. The Captain and Trouble were a perfect match, so they got it on on a waterbed, under a mirrored ceiling and out of their minds. Nine months later Trouble tracked down the Captain at his North Shore surf shack on Oahu. The Captain sat inside, cradling a bong in his lap. Trouble stood outside, cradling their newborn daughter.

"{These comics are} vile, filthy, and fit only for the trash. However, they are here to stay. These lowlifes are hard to kill… just like cockroaches."

—Uriel A. Durán, '¡Sensacional de Pocas Pulgas!'*

The Captain and Trouble's shotgun marriage didn't last more than a month or two. After the divorce the Captain went deadbeat on Trouble, and soon Trouble found herself disowned by her family and unable to scrounge up enough money to support her daughter, let alone the heroin addiction she'd also acquired. To fix this, Trouble handed over her baby daughter to a gang of drug smugglers as collateral for a bag. Then she took her smack and disappeared into the bushes. A week later the Captain learned through some of his business partners that the narco-traffickers were not exactly satisfied with this trade. If Trouble didn't return with the cash, they promised to do grim things to the Captain's wailing cherub. The Captain booked a prop plane flight to Kauai and hid in the banyan trees outside of the smugglers' quarters. When they stepped out, the Captain sneaked in. He plucked his baby from the squalor and flew with her back to Oahu as fast as he could. He threw out his bong and his Bowie coke mirror and got a legitimate job, promoting tourism. He raised his daughter as best he could, sparing no expense and eventually sending her to one of the best universities in the world. Along the way he also fell in love with her. Even more than big waves and good booze, that baby girl remains to this day the saving grace—and therefore the moral, if you will—of the Captain's life. I know because I met her twenty years later at the Ten Cat bar in Chicago, and I too fell in love with her.

Every fuzzy, rosaceous part of the Captain's daughter was perfectly round, hence his nickname for her, Peaches. Peaches had inherited her father's brains. Unfortunately, she had not inherited his libertine mindset. An adolescence spent squeezed into bikinis, followed by four years of thin-lipped indoctrination in Ivy League wimmen's studies, had convinced Peaches that the entire world was conspiring to make her feel bad about her plump bust and her equally ample butt. Maybe she was right. It would take a lot to make anyone hate her body as much as she did. Everything made her feel fat, and she hated everything that made her feel fat. Because I loved her just the way she was, and never missed an opportunity to gently tell her so, she began to hate me, too. Every time I begged my way aboard her rump and rode it like I was Robert Crumb, she hated me a little more. After almost four years of this we were at a dead end. She wasn't letting me give her an inch.

That's when the Captain flew me and Peaches down to Zihuatanejo to help him celebrate his 50th birthday. I noticed the array of slick little comics at the first corner shop we passed. The Captain laughed like a goat and Peaches rolled her green eyes as I carried an armload to the cash register. They weren't for me, I maintained, they were a thank you gift for Dan Clowes, whom I'd interviewed the day before in Berkeley. As soon as Peaches and I got back to our hotel for a nap, however, Peaches' curiosity got the best of her disdain. As she paged through the librettos her revulsion subsided into engrossment.

Soon I was reading an issue of *Almas Perversas,* or *Perverse Souls,* aloud to her: It's called, "If You Want

* *Pocaspulgas.com, 2001.*

Almas Perversas, *No. 61, Feb. 13, 1998. ©Editorial Mango. Drawn by Bazaldúa, painted by Silva.*

Almas Perversas, *No. 154, Dec. 17, 1999. ©Editorial Mango. Drawn by Bazaldúa, painted by Silva.*

Me… Pay Me!" I translated. It's about this buxom woman married to a cabdriver. They are so poor that she develops an unhealthy obsession with money. She won't let her husband have sex with her until he hands her the money he's made that day. Soon she can't have an orgasm unless there's cash in her hands, or in her face, so she turns finally to whoring. We turned to an issue of *Bellas de Noche,* or *Beauties of the Night,* about a frigid, militant, totally stacked feminist who is struck by an automobile while protesting something or other. Luckily, her enormous ass cushions the blow, and the doctors are able to save her life at the hospital. Unfortunately, the blood transfusion she receives comes from a prostitute, so when the militant returns to her home and the university, these little bubbles appear above her head and she feels giddily compelled to approach her students and… Um, yes… do that.

"Mexican comic books have always reflected our lowest instincts. They are the clearest portrait of our repressions."

—Alfonso Morales, curator, Museo Nacional de Culturas Populares*

An hour later Peaches and I were spooned together and snoring in harmony, crushed flower blossoms stuck to us like prize ribbons awarded for athletic endurance. When I awoke Peaches was studying a copy of *Las Chambeadoras (The Hard-Working Girls),* which told of the travails of a protuberant young woman who tottered about Mexico City in high heels, selling jelly on a plate. Peaches reached out to me and, again, took matters in hand. The next day I left the hotel long enough to purchase and mail a clean set to Clowes. I kept the used copies for me and Peaches. Ghetto librettos were saving our relationship, and because our relationship was the one thing in my life I cared most about, it seemed to follow that ghetto librettos were saving my life.

But they didn't save my life. They wrecked my life. As soon as Peaches and I returned to Chicago she resumed her job teaching at a suburban boarding school. She also began having sex with one of her students. Her victim, and that is the proper, legal term in this case, was a 17-year old girl in Peaches' women's poetry workshop. We'll call the girl Karma. Naturally, I was overjoyed by this development. I proposed that immediately following Karma's graduation from the academy I be allowed to join in the whoopee. I also proposed that Peaches and I get married. Peaches indignantly declined all my offers and slung more than a few outrageous arrows at me: pervert, pig, chauvinist cad. I was a man, and she could never love *men.* I cried such a flood of tears that as a last resort I took to the high ground, where I bitterly inveigled our mutual friends to join me in denouncing Peaches' lubricious, wanton violation of Karma's flowering pubescence. It's a crime, I sobbed, not just against the state of Illinois but against the good name of lesbianism itself. It's a crime against decency. She should stop what she's doing. And if she can't stop, I blubbered, the least she could do is come home to me every night and tell me all about it. But most of our friends, especially the feminists, had neither ear nor taste for my righteousness. Peaches, they said, you go, girl. Good Karma! And Peaches did go—so often that news of Karma's violation soon leaked around campus. From there the news reached Karma's mother in her home, where the poor old woman dropped dead of a heart attack.

If you have read a Mexican comic book, you know that I stole this story. I swiped the Captain's old-fashioned story of sin and redemption from almost every historieta of the past 50 years. I stole Peaches' story from every issue of *Sexsational Teachers and Students,* the ghetto libretto devoted to exposing immoral student bodies. Basically, I stole the whole story from just about every issue of any Mexican comic book ever. The thing is, I didn't steal this story. Except for the nicknames, every word of my story is true. These things really happened to us. That is my point. My moral is fuzzier. Peaches is now nestled in a comfy position of edification at an East Coast university and not in jail, where the minx belongs. She has also begun a second career giving advice to confused young people—an irony that only the Great Historieta Writer in the Sky could get away with. Me, I've been working on my math skills,

* John Ross, "Comic Escape, Mexican Fantasy," *New Internationalist,* No. 191, Jan. 1989.

learning what insult plus injury equals. At a party last summer I chanced into conversation with a stranger. This husky, blond oaf, who hailed from Denmark, boasted of a woman whose favors he'd been enjoying over the years. She was exceptionally well-rounded, nutty as a macadamia, and she came from Hawaii. The guy standing next to me almost coughed out his drink as well. Good Lord, he spluttered. He and the Dane were eating the same Peach!

Ay, cabrón. I'm the goat. I'm the ass. I'm the perverse soul, and I probably deserve the one-two punch I get at the end of this confession, because my transparently immoral outrage at Peaches' and Karma's hussy behavior marks me as the most cynical of all. I'm not one bit above the unctuous, fatuous morality of these ghetto librettos. Nor is Peaches. Nor is anybody—and that, more than anything, seems to be the inadvertent virtue of these fault-finding comics. They use preening, middle-class pretensions to level every preening, middle-class pretension. As a former Texan, I can assure you that I have way too much white trash in me to lay claim to a spotless life. In high school I dated a southern belle with three names and a satellite dish that dwarfed her family's trailer. I discovered that when this girlfriend wasn't having sex with me, she was having sex with her dad. A redneck raped her on our graduation night, but she didn't work up the courage to tell me about that until a year later, after she'd moved in with me. She also bawled that she'd been guiltily screwing her rapist on the sly ever since. The lives of my friends and neighbors were even more twisted. A friend of mine we'll call JB had a gardener's shack on his family's property. JB's family routinely referred to the man who lived in this shack as their "nigger." Their nigger walked into JB's living room one night with a shotgun and blew JB's dad into a million pieces.

All of these stories are good enough—that is, bad enough—to be in ghetto librettos. Most of them already are. Again, that is my point. I realize that these true stories may have undermined my own authority, moral or otherwise, as the cardigan-wearing, L.L. Beanish comic book critic I am. But you know what? I don't give a fuck. That's me. So when people say that Mexican comics are nasty, melodramatic trash, I agree wholeheartedly and add, That's what makes them so realistic. That's why we have to forgive them for all of their sins.

"The Mexican comic book—imbecilic, coarse, pretentious, and in the worst taste—is an insult to the 'eighth art.' In order to protect the mental health of the Mexican people, it deserves the guillotine and the firing squad."

—Rius, 'La Vida de Cuadritos'

—So What?—

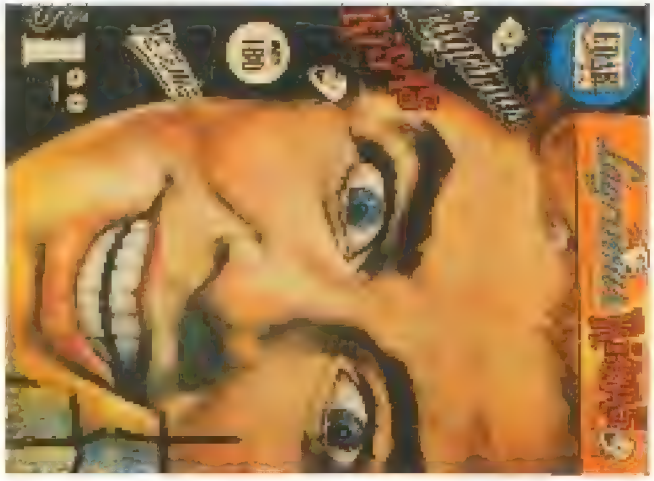
In the five years since I read that first libretto, many people have helped me in many ways. But none of them has fully agreed with my high-flying claims for these typical comics. I pushed ghetto librettos on every "alternative" cartoonist I call friend—all cynics and reprobates, to a man—but none was as impressed as I. They humored me, giggling if the cover girl who mooned us was waxing extraordinarily gibbous, but I could tell they found my obsession rather obvious. Matt Madden and Jessica Abel, the Yankee cartoonists who were living in Mexico City when I first began my research, graciously mailed me a ten-pound box full of historietas and hand-delivered yet another payload when they made a trip back to Chicago. But when Jessica handed me a stack of *Perverse Souls* in a dark, windowless bar on Damen Avenue, she looked as though she were handing me a turd. Nor were the Mexicans who sold me ghetto librettos particularly thrilled. The middle-aged woman who ran a shop on Clark Street was bewildered when I carried a pile of men's and women's titles up to the cash register. While she hesitated to ring me up, her husband approached and asked her in Spanish if everything was all right. The gist of their ensuing rapid-fire conversation was, What the hell, if the shrimp wants to buy *The Book of Passion* and *Intimate Sexual Advice,* well, let him. Gay gringos have dollars just like everyone else.

The reasons for this disrelish are many, but they are best understood by reading one book. It is called

Almas Perversas, *No. 37, Aug. 29, 1997. ©Editorial Mango. Drawn by Bazaldúa, painted by Silva.*

Memín Pinguín, *No. 73, Jul. 28, 1955. By Sixto Valencia. From* Puros Cuentos.

Adelita y las Guerrillas, *No. 79, Oct. 23, 1953. By José G. Cruz. From* Puros Cuentos.



Lágrimas, Risas y Amor, *No. 180, Apr. 25, 1966. By Luis Rey. From* Puros Cuentos.

"El Señor Burrón," Paquito, *circa 1952. By Gabriel Vargas. From* Puros Cuentos.

Puros Cuentos, or *Pure Stories*. (Like so many phrases in Mexican Spanish, *Puros Cuentos* carries a double meaning. Not only does it mean "pure storytelling," it also means "pure lies.") *Puros Cuentos* is *the* history of historietas. This multivolume set is a labor of scholarly love. Written by Armando Bartra and Juan Manuel Aurrecoechea, the three volumes to date each run between 300 and 550 large, lavishly-illustrated pages, and together they cover the Mexican comic book from the years 1874 to 1950, meaning that there is still more to come. Far more. Probably another thousand pages, at least. Once you read *Puros Cuentos* and see the century-plus history of the world's largest comic book culture in all its omnifariousness, you will see why true lovers of Mexican comics do not share my interest in the degenerate present. Even a quick flip through *Puros Cuentos* will make clear that the Mexican comic always had a rich, promising future, a future jeopardized by the publishers' yen for pesos and pandering. To Aurrecoechea, Bartra, and me in my more noble moods, the ghetto libretto marks the triumph of sleazemongering and the end of comics as Mexico's most important mass medium. If you want to learn about what was, and what should have been, read *Puros Cuentos*.[13] If you want to learn more about the future of guilt's relationship with pleasure, read on.

"During the 20th century, the Mexican comic book was the only literary form that had a truly mass audience. We're talking about tens of millions of readers. Mexicans are comic book readers. And they don't read anything else—it's not like they read comics and magazines, or comics and newspapers. They only read comics."

—Armando Bartra, in 'The Dark Underworld of Mexico's Little Stories'

Anne Rubenstein, Ph.D., is undoubtedly the leading Yankee expert on Mexican comic books. The few North American articles that exist about historietas almost invariably go to her directly, or to her book, for a quote. The booklet you are now holding is no exception. Rubenstein's book is *Bad Language, Naked Ladies, and Other Threats to the Nation*. The best thing about Rubenstein's book is her incredibly thorough, admirable research. Unfortunately, the second best thing about her book is its title. If you have survived the postmodern university, you already know what kind of dissertation I found beneath her book's promising, saucy cover. Critiques of Mexican modernity were developed from within, and in dialogue with, the discourse of modernity. That is to say that Mexican comics, despite their gendered, counterhegemonic elaboration of postrevolutionary modernity, were also participants in the construction of a prerevolutionary counternarrative of tradition. Through a seemingly endless deployment of narrative strategies and essentially Gramscian models of the construction of hegemony, the reader is shown in the end that, although Mexican comics seemed revolutionary, they weren't revolutionary.

Near the end of her thesis Rubenstein breathes so much contempt for historietas that I finally found the quote I needed. "The present-day aesthetic potential of Mexican comic books is, to be polite, strictly limited," she wrote. "At best, they are generic repetitions of stories that have long since grown tired; at worst, they are ugly, sloppy, and inept copies of those sleepy old tales. These historietas have been hugely popular, but that doesn't make them good or even interesting. There is not much point in applying the tools of art history or literary criticism to them."[14]

Harumph. Basically, Rubenstein is right. These comics *are* bad. It's not like Art Spiegelman is writing

[13] The three volumes are fairly cheap and you can order them through the bookstore Librerías Gandhi at *gandhi.com.mx*. They take Yankee plastic, you betcha. Here is the full bibliographic information: Juan Manuel Aurrecoechea and Armando Bartra, *Puros Cuentos: La Historia de la Historieta en México*, vols. 1, 2, 3, Grijalbo, 1988, 1993, 1994. Their respective ISBN numbers are 968-419-765-9, 970-05-0300-3, and 970-05-0567-7.

[14] Anne Rubenstein, *Bad Language, Naked Ladies, and Other Threats to the Nation: A Political History of Comic Books in Mexico*, Duke University Press, 1998, pp. 163–64.

them.[15] But I aim to prove her wrong anyway. She built the foundation of her middle-class, tenure-track, Yankee career on these poor comics, and now she has not one good word to say about them. When the only comic book archive in Mexico mislaid its entire collection in 1996, Rubenstein wrote, "I felt only the slightest twinge of mild concern. When the collection resurfaced, last month, I felt barely any relief. I just don't care."[16]

I hate that attitude, and I'll be damned if I let the windmill of her weary disdain stand unchallenged. These lowly comic books do have potential. If we measure a book's potential by the room for improvement within it, then these books contain more potential than any books on earth. If these comics are repetitions of old tales, then we will look at these old tales and try to sense why they still compel millions of people. I am sure that the tools of art history and literary criticism in my toolbox are too primitive and too dull for the Professor, but I will use them, as well as her excellent research, in my argument.

"The present-day aesthetic potential of Mexican comic books is, to be polite, strictly limited."

—Anne Rubenstein, 'Bad Language'

I know I will lose this one-sided battle, and deservedly so. Only a lunatic would argue that this week's issue of *Horny Laundromat Gossip* will someday grow into a work of art. But that is my argument, and remember this, even if you remember nothing else about my booklet: the first novel was not actually the first novel. The first novels were "novelties." They were dumb, melodramatic trash, read by dumb, listless escapists. Novels were the same old stories of lowly rogues, high-riding knights, and stereotypical sidekicks fighting over ooh-la-la maidens. Educated Spaniards would have been happy to amputate novelists' hands and burn their picaresque books. Miguel de Cervantes was equally revolted by novels, but he at least honored the novel's conventions enough to use them against themselves. He changed the novel not one bit, yet, quixotically, he changed it forever. For 400 years now only lunatics have argued that the novel has a strictly limited aesthetic potential.

There is nothing magical about the realism in these little novels. The ghetto libretto offers windows into the life of its reader, each window filled with painfully accurate detail. Outside there is mud, rubbish drums, and wash lines strung with graying clothing. Overhead, rubber tires and stones hold the corrugated tin roof in place. The kitchen no longer brims with bread and pots of beans; instead it's littered with gaudy packages reading *Corn Pops, Rits,* and *Coka.* But as the ghetto libretto holds reality under a magnifying glass, it exaggerates that reality to hideous, obscene proportions. These character's emotions are ten times more blinding than in real life, their outbursts are twenty times louder than those of real men and women, and their crimes are one hundred times more savage than necessary. Call this burlesque "hysterical realism."

Most Yankees who read these comics for the first time are disappointed by them, and with good reason. Few ghetto librettos are worth reading, and there are an awful lot to choose from. Seven publishers dominate the industry, publishing a total of 47 weekly titles. "Thirty-nine of these 47 titles are the kind men like," reported *La Jornada.* "Sexual themes also reign with 28 titles, among them *Sly Chicks, Drunk and Unfaithful, Cherubs and Devilettes, Wet Bedsheets, Mortal Lust, Teachers of the Mattress, Horny Laundromat Gossip,* and *Anonymous Erotica.*"[17] If these titles get your mojo working, stop

15 In the Fall of 2000 Art Spiegelman read from *Little Lit* at Cody's Books. A Berkeleyite protested Spiegelman's choice of artists for the anthology and demanded to know why he didn't include any Latino cartoonists. Spiegelman replied that he wanted to, but none had submitted anything. Furthermore, he knew very little about Latin American comics. He appealed for help to the Cody's employee who had introduced him to the crowd with her distinctly Mexican accent. Did she know anything about Mexican comics? "Ugh!" The woman winced and waved her hand as though shooing a mosquito. "They are terrible! They are awful!"

16 Anne Rubenstein, "Some Notes on the Difficulties in Writing Seriously about Graphic Narrative, or, Why This Is My Last Article for the Comics Journal (Probably)," *The Comics Journal,* No. 200, Dec. 1997, p. 98.

17 Vargas and Paul III, "Los tirajes."

¡ESO TE PASA POR ANDARLE OLIENDO EL TRASERO A LA GATA JARIOSA DE ELVIRA!
¡DÉJAME EN PAZ, DESCASTADA!
POR MÁS QUE QUISE NO PUDE CONTENER LA RABIA.
¡VÁYASE A LA FREGADA, VIEJA MOLONA!
PLAF!
RP-43

Almas Perversas, *No. 80, June 12, 1998. ©Editorial Mango. Written by Marco Nápoles, drawn by Rubén Lara, inked by Rolando Martiarena.*

¡Así Soy! ¿Y Qué? No. 555, Feb. 19, 1998. ©Editorial EJEA. Drawn by Resendiz Sanchez Silvestre, painted by Benitez.

before you jump on the bus to your nearest barrio to do some comics shopping. Almost all of these titles, as well as *So What?,* are published by Editorial EJEA. EJEA is run by the Flores family. The story of the Flores brothers would make for a grand, epic historieta—but the brothers themselves would have to approve of it, because they control, at one level or another, almost every single comic book in Mexico.[18]

EJEA is an acronym for four brothers in the family—Enrique, Jaime, Everardo and Alberto—and the EJEA name is your guarantee of utter inferiority. Whatever money EJEA spends on a comic pays for a saucy, painted cover and the plastic baggie required by law to seal racy comics. Almost none of the money goes to the interior writers and artists, as opening any EJEA comic immediately makes clear. Goggle at that jaw-dropper of a cover, hand over your pesos, and rip open the baggie. You will find that EJEA's comics are always badly written, badly drawn, and badly printed. Even the lettering is done with a computer. EJEA is undoubtedly the most cynical of all Mexican comic book publishers.[19] This feat is so considerable that it is nearly admirable, but the constraints of time, space, and the reader's patience demand that we focus on the better stuff.

"With Mexican government censors approving comics that might make R. Crumb blush and more Mexicans settling in New York, sales are surging. A New Jersey distributor… now sells 10,000 copies weekly in metro New York."

—'New York' magazine

The handful of ghetto librettos that are the best at being bad are all published by Mango and Toukán. Mango and Toukán are twin publishers helmed by two brothers also from the inexhaustible Flores family. When Jaime Flores Sr. died in the 1990s, the EJEA offices erupted in a power struggle. Two of the younger, cockier guns in the family, Germán and Jaime Jr., broke away from EJEA and founded Mango and Toukán, respectively. Yet another Flores brother, Jorge, defected in order to help his brothers with distribution and, I'm sure, the construction of Scrooge McDuck-style vaults to hold all their cash. Germán and Jaime are successful as all get out because, when they fled EJEA, they took all of the good writers and artists with them. They also had the fiendish insight to take EJEA's titillating sex and humor formula and inject it full of horror. EJEA reciprocated in kind by copying Mango and Toukán's horror glorification formula, and now almost all of these comics feed on their reader's deepest desires and fears. Any Yankee who has prepared for a trip to the Monster by reading the U.S. State Department's crime hype[20] can relate to the ghetto libretto's scare tactics.

Carjacking is almost inevitable. Do not stop for red lights and whatever you do, do not park the car to make out with your sweetheart. While the two of you are rolling and groaning in the back seat, whispering moist promises of delight, you can be certain that within seven or eight panels of foreplay your door will be yanked open and you will be pulled out at knife point. You are lucky if all you lose is your dignity, your wallet, and your Volkswagen. Beware of taking cabs, too. Half of the cab drivers in ghetto librettos are lowly rogues whose commission is to deliver you into the hands of their glue-huffing buddies from the neighborhood. If you are a working girl life is even more perilous. When you squeeze into a bus or a subway car, the mashers shred your best dress and

[18] The Flores family accomplishes this through their old family biz, CODIPLYR, S.A. (Corporation for the Distribution And Publication of Books and Magazines, Society Anonymous), which controls all the printing and distributing of comic books in Mexico. All of it. My understanding of the Flores business comes from Malvido's article and from my interviews with Zenaido Velázquez Fuentes and Verónica Vásquez, Mexico City, May 16–19, 2001.

[19] When Vicente Fox became president, EJEA cleaned up *ejea.com* muy pronto. They took down their motto, "EJEA is sly entertainment with their kinky comics!" and replaced the comics with soccer, fashion, and Backstreet Boys magazines. Then they moved their striptease promo to *sexacionales.com.* The Sexacionales site is devoid of EJEA's name, address, or telephone number. It is also devoid of redeeming qualities. Worth a look, for that reason.

[20] Here it is: "WARNING: In Mexico City, crime has reached critical levels, with marked increase in the levels of violence, as well as a significant incidence of sexual assaults in crimes committed against women. The most frequently reported crimes involve taxi robberies, armed robbery, pickpocketing and purse snatching."

leave their teeth marks on your tush. Needless to say, walking, especially at night, is out of the question.

Eating is another source of gut-wrenching worry. A recent issue of *¡Qué Transas! (What a Scam!)* is exemplary. The narrator's solemn, last words float above a burial scene: "Thirty-two thousand Mexicans die every year because they eat unhygienic foods. More than 50,000 are treated for infections or cholera.... Fruit is one of the healthiest foods we can eat, when it is clean. Beware the scams that can occur! When you eat in the street, remember that your health is worth more than your appetite. Have you been the victim of a scam? Tell us about it. We value your opinion. Write to us at Editorial Toukán."[21]

And breathing? Before I left Chicago to visit Ernesto, his last words to me were, "Don't forget your gas mask, man."

"It is not hard to see the machismo, the misogyny, the titillation, the aberrations, and the racism which make up these stories."
—Luis Tovar, 'La Jornada'

So what is a poor, honest worker to do? Turn to the authorities? Hah! In almost half the carjacks described earlier it is the police themselves who jump in and take over where you left off with your girlfriend, while you watch, handcuffed, beaten, and screaming. The health inspectors charged with enforcing the hygiene of the fruit stands in *What a Scam!* promise not to report your violations as long as you open your legs and let them violate your own ripe fruit. If as a last resort you manage to smuggle yourself into the United States, then you are really fucked. Even if you avoid being indentured into agricultural servitude and get a coveted union job in L.A., your children will be so overwhelmed by crack, gangster rap, and Quentin Tarantino movies that they will shoot anyone, including you, to get their fix. In comics, as in life, poor people live hard days with little hope of escape.

No wonder that their comic relief often comes from seeing that the rich *güeros,* or blondes, also get theirs. Historieta writers love to stick it to the rich any way they can. They will even make their macho character act like a *maricón,* a fag, if being sissy nets him more nooky in the end. If you are reading a ghetto libretto about a *patrón* with plenty of pesos, you can be sure that the hairdresser who dyes the hair of this bossman's wife is faking his lisping, limp wrist shtick. Once he eases the pampered matron into his chair he's going to whip off his bouffant wig, wipe off his makeup, and joyously commit the same outrages with her that her pseudo-poofy masseuse enjoys. That's why the woman makes appointments to get her hair and her plump, aching backside done every day. The malpractices of her hunky gynecologist are also laid out in equally blazing color. The fair-haired guy may get a disproportionate share of *chava, lana y fama*—the girl, the green, and the glory—but because of this he (and his wife) absorb more than their fair share of knavery.

Despite its blond obsession, the ghetto libretto stereotypes every character equally, regardless of his take-home pay, his color, or the content of his character. If you are a mestiza heroine, you will be as pink and round as a sorority bimbo. If you are a *negrito,* foiling a bank robbery will not prevent the artist from blowing your lips up as big as a life raft. Even the Indian, arguably the most sacred and noble of all Mexican stereotypes, has been spotted in a recent ghetto libretto chugging firewater and whooping for white women. *La abuela,* or the grandmother, may be the only stereotype still left unfucked-with—but dear old Grandma still does nothing but light candles, weep, pray, and rub rosary beads until her hands bleed.

Ghetto librettos pander to the lowest common denominator, but they are also carefully calculated to appeal to the highest, most pious sanctimony, and they do both in honor of the almighty Peso. The sleaziest thing about ghetto librettos is a bad habit they picked up from their old-fashioned, historieta forefathers: a relentless compulsion to moralize. Ghetto librettos are morality tales. More to our point, they pretend to be morality tales.

[21] Arturo Lucero, "¿A poco no? La mugria sabe rica," *¡Qué Transas!* No. 4, Aug. 2, 2000, pp. 77–79.

QUEDÓ EN EL SUELO, CON LA CABEZA REVENTADA. DESPUÉS SUPE QUE ANDABA BIEN DROGO. POR ESO HIZO LO QUE HIZO.
AL MISMO TIEMPO, LA RONCHA SALÍA BAILANDO.
¡AAAAH!
AP-36

Almas Perversas, *No. 90, Sep. 4, 1998. ©Editorial Mango. Written by Sinclair, drawn by Garmalcón, inked by Manuel Martínez García.*

ANTE NUESTRO ASOMBRO, FUE DIRECTO AL COCHE Y ABRIÓ LA PORTEZUELA.
¡OH, GRACIAS AL CIELO! ¡NECESITO A-AYUDA! ¡E-ESTOY MUY MAL HERIDO!
¡POS TE JODISTE, CAÓN! ¡MAS TE HUBIERA VALIDO HABERTE MUERTO!
¡?!
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Almas Perversas, No. 103, Dec. 4, 1998. ©Editorial Mango. Written by Satriani, drawn by Garmaleón, inked by Rolando Martiarena.

I wrote earlier that the absence of irony in these comics is what makes them so ironic. This irony, like all ironies, is only half of the truth. The truth is that ghetto librettos are ironic as hell. This two-faced nature makes them impossible to pin down, which is exactly how their publishers have planned them.

Mixing sleazery with morality is the original sin of the Mexican comic book industry. For decades the forefathers of the historieta biz stretched morality a teensy bit in order to sneak in more realistic plots yet still defend themselves against the Catholic Legion of Decency. With the Pecksniffs now largely vanquished, the son of a historieta forefather can stretch the moral as thin as see-through lingerie, using it just enough to barely cover his ass.

"As we might hope from a domain in which the deepest social and psychological anxieties are played out in freedom, unsupervised by analysts and despised by the arbiters of taste, today's historieta is extremely varied in its horridness."

—Lorna Scott Fox, 'La Vitrina'

These modern morals may be transparent, but they add a sly, tantalizing sheen to the juicy parts. It is morality that makes these comics shocking. In the States, *shocking* is already a corny word. Because he was fed from birth on the philosophy that Anything Goes, the Mod Yankee is shocked only by the absence of the shocking. The Mexican cartoonist, however, works within an old-fashioned moral code that gives him a leg up on his Yankee colleagues. The Mexican can show wild, outrageous sensation in a way-out way that is no longer possible in our demoralized culture. I know of no better way to illustrate the ghetto libretto's rejuvenating powers of hedonism than to point out the paintings of Bazaldúa and Silva, displayed throughout this issue. Above all else, Bazaldúa and Silva's sinners have *brio.* They are vigorous and lubricious. An almost hateful lust fuels their glowering male gazers and drives their sensation-crazed women to blindly grab anything, be it bottle, needle, or cock, and take it deep into their bodies. One of Mango's advertisements for *Perverse Souls* is a Bazaldúa y Silva painting that is, as Ernesto put it, "really symptomatic." It shows a typical man in his typical living room, leaning forward in order to whip the ice-cream white ass of a naked woman who kneels on all fours before him, gently licking at his shoe. The look on her china face is surprisingly content. She is pleased, unlike her oppressor. The mouth of *el hombre* curls somewhere between a sneer and a leer and his eyes burn with a fiery glee that looks like torment. "Perverse souls are beings dominated by lust, greed, arrogance, rage, sloth, gluttony and envy," the ad intones, before it rhetorically asks, "Do you know any?"

Sure. These seven deadly sins make *Perverse Souls* the best of the worst. It is by far the guiltiest pleasure on the Mexican newsstands, and that is why this *Imp* is focused almost entirely on it. This comic takes guilt—along with every other human emotion—to such extremes that you cannot feel good about feeling good about the book's feel-good endings.

Take *Perverse Souls* number 103. Please. Written by someone known only as Satriani, this pastoral tells the story of Rita. Rita is a simple, ample, country girl. Her story begins with her reclining in the piney woods below a mountain highway while her cousin, Ramón, nuzzles her bubbies and murmurs words of everlasting lust. Suddenly a red sports car flies off the road, sails over the kids' heads, and bounces down the mountainside to crash against a tree. Ramón rushes to the wreckage and, to Rita's further horror, relieves the corpses of their wallets, watches, and necklaces. They're already dead, Ramón tells a dubious Rita, so what's the diff? The kids bring the booty back to the shack they share with Ramón's folks, who are overjoyed by all the gold. Business at the family taco stand in the city has been so poor that they can no longer afford to stock meat… Paw gets an idea. He snatches a machete from the wall and drags the kids back to the crash. At first Rita and Ramón protest, but after Paw slaps them around they help him with his butchery. Soon the family business is too good. So many customers have mobbed the taco stand for seconds and thirds that the "pork" tacos are all gone. Paw gets another bright idea. With a pinch and

a wink, he forces Rita to undress every night and stand naked by the side of the road, right before a hairpin turn. Then he and Ramón go to the bottom of the cliff below and harvest the rich, dead meat caught in Rita's headlights. Rita finds it hard to argue with all the pesos accumulating on their kitchen table, and Ramón is going along with it too, so soon enough she is resigned to her obedient role. Paw's newfound fame as a chef eventually goes to his head, and in an indignant macho fit he clobbers Rita into half-consciousness and has his way with her. At this point Ramón returns home and discovers his father plugging away at his true love. This is the crux of the story, the moment when Ramón recognizes his own guilt and discovers the moral of the story: Thou Shalt Kill Thy Father. Ramón drives a jagged bottleneck straight into his dad's heart. Maw clasps her hands in anguish. "We're going to do the just thing," Ramón reassures Maw, hefting the machete. "Just like he taught us." Paw has enough muscle to supply the taco stand for almost a month. With his proceeds, Rita, Ramón, and Maw move to the coast and open a petite restaurant by the seaside. "That business let us remake our lives," Rita says in the last panel, "and forget forever the nightmare of human tacos."

"One thing I swear," Ramón adds, raising a finger. "In this little restaurant we serve only fresh fish and seafood."

Buh-doomp, splash! I'm a sucker for these upbeat endings. The final panel of the ghetto libretto may typically serve up the jail cell as a just desert, but in its more inspirational moods it also pulls up a table for two with extra chips and salsa. A good number of ghetto librettos end with the leggy heroine, her horrid past now behind her, gently setting cold drinks and hot plates before her beaming, appreciative customers. Opening your own humble restaurant is the quintessential happy ending to these stories. Compare this honorable ambition to the gold-chained, bitches-and-Benjamins, Benzes-and-Beemers garbage spouted by some of the ghetto poets working in the Yankee horror glorification industry, and it's hard not to be touched by the fundamental modesty showing beneath the ghetto libretto's ripped miniskirt. And once you've been touched by this modesty, you've been suckered. *Perverse Souls* may end economic injustice, overthrow the patriarchy, and ultimately feed the masses a healthy, low-fat diet, but it does it by using cannibalism and murder. Worst of all, it does it in the name of family values.

"The majority of editors refer to their public using terms like 'lower class,' 'humble,' and 'ignoramus.' This scorn explains, in part, the content of our comics."

—Adriana Malvido, 'Revista Mexicana de Comunicación'

This aesthetic dominates *Perverse Souls*. Just as the comic glorifies all that it eventually condemns, it magnifies the reader's bugaboos to hideous proportions before shooing them in the end. These stories terrify you so that they can more easily soothe you. The villains and heroes are equally mixed up, if not interchangeable: Heroes like Rita routinely participate in villainy and the villainous, like Ramón, often turn out heroically. Doe-eyed children kill their parents to end the cycle of family violence and straight-A students slit the throats of pedestrians in order to pay their grandma's rent. As Lorna Scott Fox puts it, "Mexican popular comics have little time for the simplistic moral trajectories or the sacralization of self-improvement that come so naturally to Anglo-Saxon cultures."

Bleeding-heart sympathies get twisted hardest right where the two sexes meet. When it comes to gender, ghetto librettos somehow manage to destroy machismo even as they stand staunchly in favor of misogyny; add to this mix equal parts of victim feminism and ass-kicking grrl power and what you have is artistic dynamite.

The story of a perverse soul named La Tania embodies this explosive potential. La Tania is a guy, I guess. He's a man who gets gonzo tit and ass implants so he can sidle up to his coworkers in the stripper biz and use his bogus sisterhood to con these poor, exhausted ladies into accepting a sympathetic massage and, eventually, his monstrous schlong. You go, guy. But La Tania pays a price for his hard-earned prowess. Every day he has to fight off intolerant nacos who jeer at his faggoty ass. He also fights off the fists, then the sexual advances, of

Almas Perversas, *No. 103, Dec. 4, 1998. ©Editorial Mango. Written by Satriani, drawn by Garmaleón, inked by Rolando Martiarena.*

Almas Perversas, *No. 57, Jan. 16, 1998. ©Editorial Mango. Written by Satriani, drawn by Mario Guevara, inked by Alejandro Rodriguez.*

his own father. We root, You go, girl, as La Tania struggles to make her way in the world as a woman. Once she is at last accepted as a woman, she uses her status to two-time the poor guy she gets her manicured claws on. By the time La Tania ends up in the morgue (gunned down by a jealous lesbian), it's clear that the macho pig had finally achieved his life-long dream: to be a man-hating bitch.[22]

In short, *Perverse Souls* has made an art, of sorts, of making the worst of all worlds.

On the surface, dirt is proof of the ghetto libretto's vitality. The word *smutty* literally means smudged by dirt, soot, grime, or fungus—and these comic books have acquired all four of the basic smut groups by the time you unearth them tenth- or twelfth-hand from a stack moldering in the miasmic Mexico City smog. They're spotted. They're soiled. They're salty. If you licked one, you might get diarrhea. This unclean aesthetic lives beneath the surface of the ghetto libretto in its bloody heart, and it is here, at their storytelling core, that these comics are dirtiest. Ghetto librettos are not pornography. They are smut, and smut is a hundred times dirtier than pornography.

Luis Tovar's term for ghetto librettos is *sensaporno,* and he wrote, "It makes no sense to masturbate while viewing a sensaporno. If all you want to do is to pull the neck of your goose, there are other magazines that offer much more appropriate photos for almost the same price. Incredible as it seems, the *quality of the story* is the only reason that hundreds of thousands of readers make companies like EJEA, Toukán, Bonanza, and Mango so rich and fat."[23] The writers themselves know this dirty little secret better than anybody. Juan José Sotelo is generally acknowledged as the best *argumentista,* or writer, in the Mango/Toukán roost, and therefore in the entire business. Sotelo put it this way: "Pornography is just sex, all groaning and moaning," he told Lorna Scott Fox. "We, on the other hand, build a story around it, with obstacles and conflicts."[24]

"This collection of prejudices and clichés goes much farther, in an aberrant and dangerous sense, than traditional pornography. Here we are … dealing with an entire sexual and social miseducation that 'conceptualizes the world from the perspective of the male gaze,' absolutely for the worse."

—Luis Tovar, 'La Jornada'

Gringo pornography has never been driven by cause and effect. The mailman rings the doorbell as always, the cheerleaders accidentally walk into the boys' locker room, and the young nudists just happen to be hitchhiking to Denver. And that's the stuff with pretensions to storytelling. Usually it's just two girls, a swimming pool, and a camera. No excuse is needed in American porn because humping just happens, and that's the whole point of ogling it. But some Mexicans still prefer to read smut, and therefore, in the best historietas past and present, there's always a rip-roaring story behind the coming together. This wellspring of cause and effect flows from the Mexican's inescapably Catholic sense of right and wrong—from his morality—and it is this morality that accounts for the ghetto libretto's obscene success. Sure, there are close-ups of humongous bazooms, earth-shaking asses, and wet lips forming little red cheerios. But it is the writing that makes these things really dirty. The unholy grail of the pornographer is mating the most outrageous sex with the most hellacious story. That is what the wizards of ghetto librettos do.

Pretend you are Ricardo Rentería, an ace argumentista alongside Sotelo and Satriani on the Mango/Toukán roster. You have to script a graphic "graphic novel" about a married man having sex with an unmarried woman. That's pornography with a tiny, titillating twist. Big whoop. But make the married man married to Jesus—that is, make him into a priest—and you've gone past porn into the realm of the immoral. You've gotten your hands dirty. Next drive your priest to these infernal ecstasies by the constant machinations of a lip-licking wench, whose only desire is to make men desire her,

[22] Armando de la Roca, "La esposa le salió travestí," *Almas Perversas,* No. 57, Jan. 16, 1998.

[23] Tovar, "Sensaporno."

[24] Fox, "The Way We Are."

mainly because she's a stripper and—like all strippers—she enjoys her work. Make the stripper also delight in seducing teenage mestizo boys and make one of these boys, when he learns that his busty sex mentor has also corrupted the blond priest—the priest whose blue eyes the entire village looked up to for guidance—go wild with righteous indignation. Make him race over to the strumpet's hotel room and slice off her buttery brown breasts with a carving knife. That's not just sick, that's racist, in more ways than I care to count. Finally, have the priest renounce his collar and embrace the boy, thanking him for everything, and set off to sadly walk the Jalisco countryside, defrocked, but with a renewed, freelance will to continue caring for the poor and unfortunate. Drop in the word "hope" and a rosy sunset and your upbeat ending will offend every self-respecting human being on the planet.

"These women are very aggressive, sexually speaking. Their men are like puppets. The men behave like machos, but they are defeated every time."

—José Luis Silva, in 'The Dark Underworld of Mexico's Little Stories'

Except for me. Señor Renteria's tale is pretty poorly told, but overall it oozes undeniable juice. It has character and conflict as well as the unimpeachable excuse I need to justify liking it. Rentería has made the village vixen into something more than the one-dimensional man-eater I described above. When Father Blond first lectures the tramp, she tells him to take his sermon and stick it. Why is he blaming her for giving the guys a good old time? Because he can't participate? (Yes.) And anyway, she adds, for once exhibiting modesty rather than her gazongas, it's the only way I have to earn a living. Unimpressed by her economic logic, Father Blond commits the cardinal no-no of denying her absolution for her sins. She is enraged and she vows to get him back, specifically by getting him between her legs. When she finally seduces him she gloats, "Now you're just as rotten as me! Go on, go and see if beating your chest with your fists will save you from burning in Hell!" It is hard to resist our hussy's heroically perverse, impudent spirit. She is rooting out hypocrisy, if only to fuck its brains out. This story is not *The Scarlet Letter* and it is not Graham Greene, but it does grow out of the same fecund stuff, the same dirt, that so-called "real" literature grows from. With less prurient writing and more prudent editing, this little story could be a tragedy, not a travesty.

Here we run into the law. Although the story I just related to you does exist,[25] and was read by hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of people, it is still an illegal story. Mexican writers, cartoonists, and publishers have fucked with the law in such creative ways that it would be a bit of a shame if ghetto librettos became legitimate. They would no longer be a *dirty* shame.

Mexican law forbids comic books that do any of the following: "Stimulate or excite evil passions or sensuality; destroy the reader's devotion to work, enthusiasm for study, or understanding of the honest effort necessary for all legitimate success; contain adventures in which the protagonists, breaking laws and refusing to respect established institutions, succeed in their undertaking; give instructions in carrying out illegal acts, provoke disdain for the Mexican people, their abilities, customs, traditions, history or democracy; or systematically use expressions that offend correct use of the language."[26] I found this long-winded decree in Irene Herner's invaluable history of Mexican comics, *Mitos y Monitos (Myths and Comic Strips).* Herner chose to illustrate this comics code with reproductions of jutting, bare bazooms and booties, splash-page beheadings and husband-beatings, all accompanied by word balloons filled with untranslatable slang.[27] For decades Mexican cartoonists have obviously been using the government's taboo list as their to-do agenda.

[25] Ricardo Rentería Lomelí, "Al tubo se aferraba cuando se encuera-ba," *Almas Perversas,* No. 55, Jan. 2, 1998.

[26] "Reglamento de revistas ilustradas en lo tocante a la educación," *Diario Oficial de la Federación,* Mar. 11, 1944.

[27] Irene Herner, *Mitos y Monitos: Historietas y Fotonovelas en México,* Editorial Nueva Imagen, 1979, pp. 139–146.

ME SENTÍ COMO UN TÍTERE ANTE AQUELLA BRUJA.
¡¿QUÉ SENTISTE, PAPUCHO?!
¡NO TIENES REMEDIO, ERES UNA PERDIDA! ¡EL DEMONIO DE LA CARNE TE HIZO SU PRISIONERA!

Almas Perversas, *No. 55. Jan. 2, 1998. ©Editorial Mange. Written by Ricardo Rentería, drawn by Garmaleón, inked by A. Mendez and Gustavo Vega.*

Almas Perversas, *No. 55. Jan. 2, 1998. ©Editorial Mango. Written by Ricardo Rentería, drawn by Garmaleón, inked by A. Méndez and Gustavo Vega.*

Credit for this paradox goes partly to the publishers and partly to the Classifying Commission for Illustrated Magazines and Periodicals, the government agency that has failed for over 50 years to enforce its own code. Mexico's war on indecency has been about as successful as the United States' war on drugs, and the story of this failure forms the most entertaining part of Anne Rubenstein's book. As Rubenstein's excellent research shows, the Classifying Commission essentially worked with the sleaziest publishers in an unspoken, agreed-upon tango of half-truths and inaction. The antics of the Lombardini brothers, two publishers whose devotion to chicanery verges on the heroic, best demonstrate the steps of this ritual dance.

Vodevil, *No.* 36, *circa 1953. From* Puros Cuentos.

Rubenstein says that Sergio and Hector Lombardini were "marginal figures" in the industry who specialized in publishing only "the raunchiest, least appealing trash," including some coquettish comic books.[28] In 1953 the Classifying Commission called Hector before it to punish him for his girlie comic, *Vodevil (Vaudeville)*. I do not actually publish *Vaudeville,* Hector explained. I am the magazine's censor; I take out all of the objectionable material and the publisher then puts it back in. Who is this publisher? demanded the Commission. A man in Texas named Mendez, Hector replied, pointing to the fictitious name he had printed on *Vaudeville*'s masthead. Well, the Commission inquired, where does your paycheck come from? Nowhere, Hector replied. I work on this magazine for free, because of my friendship with Mendez. How can we find this Mendez? asked the Commission. I do not know, said Hector, speaking truthfully for once: I have never seen him. A messenger boy brings the magazine to my office at 21 Paseo de Reforma, I censor it, and the boy takes it away. Unimpressed, the Classifying Commission filed an order for Hector's arrest and dispatched an investigator to 21 Paseo de Reforma. Of course, the investigator found no Hector and no office at that address. But he doubtless passed many copies of *Vaudeville* on the newsstands while walking back to his office. Three months later, the order for Hector's arrest was mysteriously voided by a single member of the Commission—a member with a financial interest in the business of printing.

So the Commission hauled in Hector's brother, Sergio, for the offensive language in one of Sergio's own comics. Sergio swore not to swear again and carried on exactly as before. When the Commission brought in Sergio again for other outrages committed in his newspaper, *Nota Roja*—which specialized in photographs of murder victims and auto accident carnage—they chastised Sergio for breaking his earlier promise. That was not me, Sergio replied, that was my brother, Hector, and that is why I fired him. Unimpressed, the Commission fined Sergio and took away his license to publish *Nota Roja.* Sergio renamed the paper *Prensa Policiaca* and continued publishing. The fine was never collected.

Meanwhile, Hector continued publishing *Vaudeville* without any name or address whatsoever on its masthead. He then revisited the Classifying Commission on his own free will and declared that he was a concerned citizen. He declared that he was appalled by his own magazine, *Vaudeville*, and he demanded that the Commission more thoroughly investigate that scoundrel of an editor, the mystery man responsible for putting all that pornography back into it. This time he told the Commission that the mystery man's name was Muñoz, not Mendez. As Hector sauntered out the door, he mentioned casually that the Commission might also consider allowing *Nota Roja* to resume publishing. In his opinion, *Nota Roja* was a decent publication.

The Groucho and Chico Marxist behavior of the Lombardini brothers is representative of the publishers we are concerned with here. A disreputable publisher's

[28] My account of the Lombardini brothers is condensed, paraphrased, and dramatized from Rubenstein, *Bad Language,* pp. 148–152, as well as her article, "Seduction of the Mexican Innocent," *The Comics Journal,* No. 157, Mar. 1993, pp. 45–48.

first line of defense is to use only freelance artists, writers, and editors. That way, when the Commission calls the scampish publisher before them, the publisher can blame the transgression on the editor. The editor blames the writer. The writer blames the artist, who claims (truthfully) that he was just following the publisher's directions. At this point the publisher reappears before the exhausted Commission and promises solemnly that he has fired all the wayward freelancers. The next day he re-hires the freelancers under a new set of pseudonyms and together they resume churning out the obscenity. Once the Commission makes it clear that they can no longer ignore this ruse, the publisher brings in his heavy artillery. He appeals to the Commission's sense of fairness and decency by producing huge stacks of comics as wanton as his own and demanding that the already overworked and underfunded Commission investigate every single one of the offenders. If that fails, he plays his trump card: national pride. Publishers know that one of the Classifying Commission's unspoken, but prime purposes is to protect Mexico's culture (and economy) from immoral, capitalist invaders, so the publisher asks the Commission: Do you really want our children to read tales about Yankee cowboys who slaughter "savage" Indians? About gringos who are constantly betrayed by sleepy, deceitful Mexicans? About armies and superheroes who glorify imperialist wars? Of course not. By censoring our indigenous cultural expressions, the publisher thunders, the Commission is paving the way for the hated Yankees to poison our Mexican youth! By the time the Commission is fed up with all this specious flag-wrapping and especially with the public outrage the flag-wrapping does nothing to alleviate, it cancels the damned comic. At this point the publisher changes the name of the comic and the life cycle of the historieta begins anew.[29]

"The competition between the publishers generates yellow journalism, pornography, terror, and violence."

—Adriana Malvido, 'Revista Mexicana de Comunicación'

These roundabout tactics have kept sex on the newsstands for a long time, and they have worked even better when the publishers are merely getting away with murder. In Gregory Gransden's documentary, the historieta collector Ulises Mavridis sifts through a horror show of historietas from the 1960s. "Here we have pigs eating a child," Mavridis says, shaking his head with sad, resigned awe. "Here a daughter murders her father. A butcher cuts off the arm of a boy who is stealing meat. A barber cuts the throat of his customer. A crazy doctor cuts open the skull of a living boy—it's one of the bloodiest covers in the history of Mexican comics. This comic book, *Miseria,* was about a circus owner who deformed children to make them into better beggars. You see, a child kept in this cage for three or four years would be completely deformed, and she would upset people so much that they would give her more money. This is one of the cruelest stories that exists in Mexican comics. It was reprinted again and again. Some of these covers are just terrible! Here you see torture—a boy having his mouth burned with a cigarette. This was done by one of the most famous artists in Mexico." Mavridis then holds up a book whose cover shows a screaming man's slick, flayed face oozing ichor and blood while a grinning, cadaverous tormentor pulls both of his eyeballs from their sockets. "These would never have been permitted in the United States," Mavridis explains, "but here in Mexico, they were all authorized by the Ministry of Education. This is what Mexican children used to buy in the 1960s. None of these were for adults only. Not a single one!"[30] Once you see these comics,[31] you will understand why Mexican citizens carried them to the Zócalo, the heart of Mexico City's downtown, and set them ablaze.

[29] This condensation of typical practices is taken from Rubenstein's works, op cit., Herner, *Mitos y Monitos,* pp. 160–162, and my own interviews with Zenaido Velázquez Fuentes, Verónica Vásquez, and Oscar Bazaldúa Nava, Mexico City, May 16–19, 2001.

[30] Gransden, "The Dark Underworld."

[31] The eyeball-squishing cover is from *Las Momias de Guanajuato (The Mummies of Guanajuato)*, No. 42, and it is on display at Mavridis' web site, "The History of Mexican Comic Books," located at *angelfire.com/az/monjeloco/*

ARRASTRÁNDOME HASTA ESE MALNACIDO, LE "PICOTIÉ" UN OJO SIN NINGUNA COMPASION...
¡CHOUF!
¡AAAY!
¡TOMA, INFELIZ MALA MADRE!
Y ANTES DE QUE PUDIERA DEFENDERSE, LE BOTÉ EL OTRO.
¡AAY!
¡VETE DE UNA VEZ AL INFIERNO!
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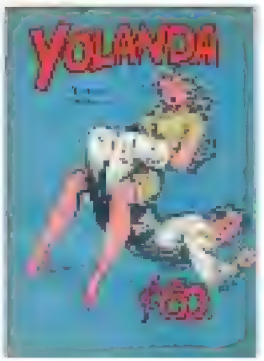
Almas Perversas, *No. 110, Jan. 22, 1999. ©Editorial Mango. Written by Marco Nápoles, drawn by Garmaleón, inked by Rolando Martiarena.*

La Ley de la Calle, *No. 3, May 4, 1998. ©Editorial EJEA. Drawn by Pegaso, painted by Guillermo Peimbert.*

Given the barbaric nature of these comics, it is odd that the Classifying Commission spent almost all of its energy banging its fists on the table over a little T&A. One might suspect that the Commission was doing some boodling of its own. And one would be right in this suspicion. Take *Yolanda,* for example. In 1952 Adolfo Mariño Ruiz, a regular *Vaudeville* artist, began self-publishing *Yolanda.* Mariño describes *Yolanda* as "a rather saucy comic book," but the whole truth is that it was a rather sadomasochistic comic book. Self-publishing an underground comic book at any time, let alone the 1950s, is a difficult endeavor in any country. But Mariño prospered. "I was the writer, the artist, I took it to the printers—I did everything," says Mariño. "Sales were quite high."[32] But after five issues the Commission, in a highly unusual use of force, threw Mariño in jail. What exactly had Mariño done? Raised hemlines, certainly—but Yolanda sported no more leg than any other woman in ink. Mariño's real crime was self-publishing *Yolanda.* Specifically, self-distributing her. *Yolanda* enraged the distributor (yes—singular) of historietas by threatening the distributor's monopoly on lascivious comics. The distributor went to the Classifying Commission and used his singular weight to press the Commission into locking up Mariño.[33] There, said the Commission, problem solved. Everybody happy? The next day the Commission quietly let Mariño out the back door of the hoosegow. Today, at the mellow age of 91, Mariño continues to draw exquisite molls. But he does not self-publish them.



Yolanda, *No. 3, Feb. 6, 1952. By Adolfo Mariño Ruiz (signed "Ruiz" only)*

When a cartoonist stepped over the political line drawn by the Mexican comics code—i.e., mentioned politics at all—the Commission sicced the Mexican army on him. Rius was the cartoonist who stated that the Mexican comic book deserved the firing squad, and he has a good reason for choosing that particular method of execution. He is a Marxist and the most political of all Mexican cartoonists, and for years he struggled against the mainstream system in order to publish his satirical comic books, *Los Supermachos* (no translation necessary) and *Los Agachados (The Bent-over,* or *The Downtrodden).* Rius is a sly guy: he got away with criticizing the Mexican government by placing his stories in Aztec times. But his readers knew which government Rius was really writing about. So did the government. As production artists readied issue 17 of *The Bent-over* for the printing press, the government stormed in and forced the colorist to repaint a woman's dress so that it matched her flesh. When the comic came out, the Commission deemed the character nude and therefore illegal and busted Rius. Still Rius persevered in putting out his comics. By 1969 the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) was so sick of Rius' lampooning that they sentenced him to death by the firing squad. (This is for drawing cartoons! Perhaps the government also considered banishing Rius to a desert island or putting a fly in his soup.) The soldiers led Rius to the mountains outside of the military prison at Toluca, tied his blindfold, gave him his last cigarette, and made him sweat. Then they made him sweat some more. At the last second the government rescinded its order. The PRI had made its point. The soldiers untied Rius and made him promise to be a respectful cartoonist.[34] To his credit, Rius has broken that promise. He continues to dis the Mexican government and almost all governments everywhere.

32 Adolfo Mariño was famous for drawing respectable comics as well, most notably *El Charro Negro (The Black Horseman).* The story of Mariño's adventure in self-publishing comes from Gregory Gransden's personal interview with Mariño, Mexico City, 1999.

33 Gregory Gransden, personal interview with Ulisis Mavridis, Mexico City, 1999.

34 Hinds and Tatum, *Not Just for Children,* p. 71. Hinds' and Tatum's account of Rius' Dostoevskyian mock execution comes from their personal interview with Rius. I jazzed it up a bit by adding the cigarette and the sweat.

Searching for Bobby Fischer's Comic Books

Bobby Fischer, the anti-Semitic chess wizard whose diet consists almost entirely of hamburgers, is a rabid collector of Mexican comics. In 1992 the United States government sentenced the expatriate Fischer to 10 years in prison, effectively banning him for life from his homeland. Fischer had no choice but to entrust his Stateside belongings, stored in a rental locker in Pasadena, to one of his few remaining friends. Unfortunately for Fischer in 1998 this friend forgot to pay the rent on Fischer's locker. In leiu of the rent the managers auctioned off all of Fischer's belongings, including his collection of Mexican comic books.

In an extremely rare public appearance Fischer took to the airwaves of the Philipine radio network, Radyo Bombo, on January 27th, 1999. As the deejay asked Fischer to please stop shouting into the microphone, Fischer delivered this spittle-flecked eulogy for his collection:

"I had thousands and thousands of Mexican comic books. Okay, I love Mexican comic books because they're real earthy. These are not for kids, like American comic books... These Mexican comics, they're not like kiddie comics. They cover everything: getting pregant, abortion, corrupt police—you know, the whole thing. Anyway, I had the first hundred numbers of a famous Mexican comic called *Denuncia.* I was in Mexico six months, going to all these used comic book stores, looking through all this filthy old garbage trying to find them... They were collectors' items. Finally, I met this very, very famous football player, and he had a connection with the editorial up there at *Denuncia,* and I got the first, almost complete set of the first one hundred comics. Just these *Denuncia* comics they stole were worth a fortune. They're worth thousands, tens of thousands, more maybe—just these *Denuncia* comics alone... This is a ripoff. This is a mega-robbery of what I've spent a lifetime accumulating. This is a giant conspiracy of the Jewish world government."[1]

[1] The full text of Fischer's rant is at *internetchess.com*

This history of oppression fostered today's ghetto libretto. For one, illegality turned these comics into a forbidden fruit. Reading them is a bit like blowing dope smoke in a cop's face or driving down to Georgia to sodomize the one you love. What's more, the fact that these comics were not allowed to be pornography forced them to transcend pornography. Censorship, however ineptly enforced, forced Mexican cartoonists to abandon explicitness and be dirty in a more creative manner. To cite a parallel example closer to home, for decades the U.S. government placed censorious restrictions on what the majority deemed low-class, dirty, "race" music. These restrictions were part of the reason that Clarence and Spencer Williams wrote the 1923 song "Nobody In Town Can Bake a Sweet Jelly Roll Like Mine," with so much craft, suggestion, and eroticism. Listen to Bessie Smith's version of this song, then listen to almost any "race" record from today—say, Snoop Doggy Dogg grunting and banging away at some ho—and you will see why smut is elliptical and artful and porn is just dumb. Something similar to old-fashioned, wordplay foreplay is at work in even the raunchiest ghetto libretto. These comics do glory in showing how innocent people are made sleazy, but they miraculously restore sleazery's long-lost innocence.

Visually, these "pornographic" comics are only rated PG-13 or R by our standards. Even in the most ass-obsessed issue, an asshole never once winks at you. Nor has there ever been a pubic hair. Until recently you rarely saw an entire nipple; even now there is often an aureola supporting a pert soap bubble or curl of hair perfectly in place. And no matter what, you'll never see a guy's dong in these macho comics. People often keep their underwear on when they get it on, because it's how the package is wrapped that makes turning the pages so exciting. Women have always known this. That's why they don't buy *Playgirl.* What woman wants to see some dork with his dork hanging out, a smile on his face and a mug of coffee in one hand? The same goes for men, arguably, since half the fun of the Male Gaze is undressing the object of your oppression with your own two eyeballs. When a heroine or vixen wobbles

ELLA, EN VEZ DE APARTARSE HASTA APRETÓ LAS PIERNAS.
¡C-CANIJA MUDITA, SI BIEN QUE LE ENCANTA!
TRASH
BASURA
EN FRENTE DE MÍ, EL JACINTO COMENZÓ A HACERLE UNA CHAMBRITA.
¿Y ORA QUÉ LE PASARÁ A ESA BABOSA? ¿POR QUÉ TENDRÁ ESA CARA DE MENSA?
AP-26

Almas Perversas, *No. 125, Apr. 22, 1999.* ©*Editorial Mango. Written by Armando de la Roca, drawn by Garmaleón, inked by Rolando Martinvena.*

Almas Perversas, *No. 125, Apr. 22, 1999. ©Editorial Mango. Written by Armando de la Roca, drawn by Garmaleón, inked by Rolando Martiarena.*

her way to the corner store, she always leaves a trail of pop-eyed vendors toppling over their tamale carts, rubbernecked drivers zooming toward head-on fender-benders, and panting hardhats stepping off their skyscraper into thin air. Half of desire is frustration, and ghetto librettos makes the most of this tease.

Linguistically, ghetto librettos really reach for the cheese. Bad puns and groaners abound, especially in the lightweight, sexsational funnies. Many Yankee readers may remember the all too short section on *los piropos*, or traditional Mexican catcall flatteries, in *Dos Mundos (Two Worlds)*, a standard U.S. high school Spanish textbook. Thanks to this astonishing act of multiculturalism, an entire generation of gringos has now roamed the States for almost two decades wolf-whistling, *"¡Que curvas, y yo sin frenos!"* at baffled gringas. What curves, and me with no brakes![35] Making the beast with two backs is the craft of the argumentista. Some of the titles are easy to translate with a Spanish dictionary: An issue of *Bellas Cariñosas (Affectionate Beauties)* shows a tiny man hugging a sky-high pair of sleek legs, gazing blissfully upward at their flowering into an enormous, velvety ass. *Demasiado RABO por mi chico NABO,* runs the tagline. Too much TAIL for my TWERP. (Or, if you want to be literal about it, too much TAIL for my boy TURNIP.) The best, i.e., worst doggerel is beyond my limited Spanish,[36] so I asked Alex Giardino about one tagline from *The Hard-Working Girls.* Beneath the title's mascot—a cheery filly in a maid's outfit eating a banana—the cover shows two guys in snorkels and flippers grinning in a swimming pool. Above them two pillowy-assed women float by like clouds, supremely indifferent and most certainly above all the ogling beneath them.

"A gloriously sick-minded writing team rules {at Mango/Toukán}, headed by J.J. Sotelo… Elaborate, obscene, unexpectedly touching."
—Lorna Scott Fox, 'La Vitrina'

"Pescuezo parado, chango mojado," Alex mused. "Okay. This means 'wet monkey.' *Mojado* is wet, *chango* is monkey. *Parado* means stopped… Shit. I think it's something like, 'A stopped neck, or a stopped fish, and a wet monkey.'" She chortled. "I don't know."

Tempted as I was to keep this insinuative translation, I asked Claudia Weinmann, a professional translator of Spanish, about the little rhyme. "Upright pride, wet cunt," Weinmann said. "*Parado* means upright in this case, and *pescuezo* is neck. So," she winked, "I believe pride is meant figuratively." *Chango* literally means monkey, but it also means pussy in the same way that pussy means, well, pussy. If *parado* can mean upright, that is why so many writers delight in twisting it. The naco with the rich blonde girlfriend *es bien parado*, meaning that he is now well-set or well-established, financially. But the leer on his face also means that he *es bien parado*, or good and erect, at the same time. Uprighteousness is also served with a double entendre twist when a wit says that the most honest member of a congregation *es el miembro más recto*, meaning that Señor Pious also has the straightest, stiffest member in the church.

Ghetto libretto writers and editors did not invent this everyday art. It is quite common, and I do mean common, in Mexico. The dirty habit is called *albur*, to relentlessly prod and poke the nuances of the language to their sexual extremes. Freud is my touchstone in understanding historietas, but I have to disagree with the doctor on one important point: a cigar is *never* just a cigar. Not in Mexico. If you are ordering tacos from a stand and the scalawag vendor wags his eyebrows and asks if you desire *chile* with your tacos, be sure to say, "No, I want them *picante* (spicy)," or you will get your tacos with a free, heaping helping of albur. Either way you are ordering the exact same thing, but if you ask for a chile in

35 When I asked Ernesto Priego about this particular *piropo,* he was bewildered. "They taught you that?" he said. "Man, no self-respecting Mexican would ever say anything that lame." To our mutual delight, that same day he and I discovered a "Killer Truckdriver" issue of *Almas Perversas* with the very phrase emblazoned on its cover.

36 One of the most amusing ways to waste an afternoon for unscholarly purposes is by typing these jingly catchphrases into atrocious computer translation programs that fart back gems like these: "For the credit card, she lost her panties;" "They told it that he/she suckle-gilds;" and my personal favorite, "Expelled to have a black past… for the buttocks!"

your taco, you are asking for a weiner in your taco. You could slap the *taquero naco* and call a cop, but the miscreant could say with some degree of hurt honesty that you asked for it. Thanks to the Classifying Commission, the people who publish these comics are like that taquero rubbing his jaw. At all times they must rigidly maintain a state of plausible deniability.[37]

Some Mexican comic book publishers—namely, the decent and respectable house, Novedades—would rather not ply this rude art. Novedades is one of the oldest historieta publishers, and they do not publish ghetto librettos. They cater to a staunch, borderline middle class readership with historietas printed with the traditional, brown-and-white, *mediotono* ink—historietas that glamorize cops named Roger Garrett and Trevor Calvert. Novedades' sales are still high—*El Libro Vaquero (The Cowboy Book),* currently over one thousand issues running, sells 800,000 copies per week[38]—but their traditional mestiza reader is aging and her kids are turning to mutant Japanese and Yankee entertainment. Novedades is doomed and they know it. "We respect certain limits," says Rafael Marquez Torres, Novedades' editor-in-chief, "but our competitors don't. They don't respect anything. They use a lot of crime with horrific murders and necrophilia. We don't do that, not even in our horror stories. There are ghosts, sure, but they don't physically destroy things. We want to give our readers a product for the whole family, something an adult can take home without embarrassment."[39] When interviewed, Torres always insinuates foul play on the part of his competitors. Novedades "both envies and deplores the new specialist publishers like EJEA or Toukán," according to *La Vitrina.* "It suspects [EJEA and Toukán] of paying off the authorities to flatter the reader's basest instincts in peace."[40] These rumors of skullduggery may be due to jealousy, but they are true.

"The publishers here operate just like the mafia. They're so rich that they can afford to pay off the authorities regularly, instead of paying the authors."

—Rius, 'The Comics Journal'*

Zenaido Velázquez Fuentes is one of the most important and knowledgeable historietistas in Mexico. He has worked in the industry for over 35 years and he is currently inking for Mango and Toukán. Zenaido showed me a comic he was working on about two girls who get raped at gunpoint. I asked Zenaido how the Flores brothers planned to get this comic past the Classifying Commission.

Zenaido shrugged. "They bribe them."

Free market reform is the new currency of Mexico's business class. The artful dodge is no longer necessary.

Alex Giardino, Ernesto Priego, and Gregory Gransden have all made Mexico City their home, and all three of them know far more about the Monster than I. As a disclaimer, I must say that these folks are in no way responsible for any of the claims I am making in

* John J. Pint, "Who's This Rius?" *The Comics Journal,* No. 137, Sep. 1990, p. 30.

37 In fact, these "pornographic" comics are always clucking about pornography. A nudie pinup is as sure a sign of bad guyness as a ponytail or *el músico del 'rock.'* American-style videotapes invariably lead even the most peach-cheeked lad or lass down the road to indecency and rot. In *Perverse Souls* number 151 a single triple-x videotape transforms a middle-class matron into a hot-mama housewife who drags a beefy shoeshine guy into her respectable home and wrecks her bed, her marriage, and her mortgage. In case the comics' messages aren't blatant enough, the Flores brothers inserted this "educational" public service message: "In the 1950s began the abuse, the more than immoral degradation of porno actresses; moreover, these kinds of movie theaters became places where more than shameless acts were committed.... Is it necessary to see this, if it is already part of our natural instincts? Our ancestors did not need this in order to reproduce or find pleasure. And there are better ways of showing sexuality, more healthy and natural than triple-x films." Such as Mango y Toukán comic books. Tabatha, "¿Que es el cine XXX?" *Almas Perversas,* No. 61, Feb. 13, 1998, pp. 91–92. Translation by Eli Bishop.

38 Fajardo, "¿Qué leemos?"

39 Gregory Gransden, personal interview with Rafael Marquez, Mexico City, 1999. Like any wise historieta editor, Marquez is spinning the truth a bit: An issue of *El Libro Vaquero* in my collection (No. 973) features a doggy-style sex scene on pages 45–46, and several gratuitous bathing scenes, one of which involves a gaggle of women washing each other's backs before a group of dusty hombres joyously splashes into the river to help them lather (pp. 62-69).

40 Fox, "The Way We Are."

Almas Perversas, *No. 125, Apr. 22, 1999.* ©*Editorial Mango. Written by Armando de la Roca, drawn by Garmalcón, inked by Rolando Martiarena.*

¿ENTONCES SERÍAS CAPAZ DE VOLVERLO A HACER SI OTRA MUJER TE PROVOCARA?
N-NO... CÓMO CREE... YO NO...
¡MÍRAME BIEN, CHAVO! ¡HAZME SENTIR QUE TE GUSTO!
AD-14

Almas Perversas, *No. 50, Nov. 28, 1997. ©Editorial Mango. Written by Satriani, drawn by Luis Guarneros, inked by A. Méndez.*

this booklet. It is safe to say that the four of us agreed only on one, essential starting point: We like ghetto librettos. At least we think we do.

First, the feminist perspective. In early 2001 Alex drove up the coast from Ramparts, Los Angeles, (where she now lives) to my home in Oakland. (I moved to Oakland due to another historieta-like chain of events linking a 20-year old *Imp* intern, a therapist at a Chicago women's health center, and the ex-girlfriend of a Chicago 'zine comrade. I'll spare you the confession. Suffice to say that I was living in California with a new girlfriend who—coincidentally, I swear—was one hell of a lawyer.) Alex and I went to a coffee shop in Oakland's Grand Lake district, where we feasted on ghetto librettos like this one, issue 50 of *Perverse Souls:*

"In the illogic of the Classifying Commission it is more noxious to see a drawing of genitals than to see a naked, drunken maid being lashed by the belt and the insults of her boss, or to see a little lambchop being raped by her stepfather while her drunken mother watches."

—Luis Tovar, 'La Jornada'

A middle aged, middle class social worker with red hair has a tough case, namely the naco, Ricardo. Ricardo is a ponytailed teen who raped a girl from his 'hood. In his defense, Ricardo mumbles that the chick provoked him. The combustible redhead jumps all over Ricardo for this outrageous statement. How could you commit such a savage, unspeakable act, she demands, cupping Ricardo's trembling face in her white hands. Would you ever do such a thing again? Ricardo hangs his head. No? Old Red's nipples spike against her shirt as she slides open her legs, giving the terrified naco a good, long look at her innermost pinkness. She licks her lips and asks, Not even if another woman provoked you…?

By the time Old Red had bullied poor Ricardo into giving her what she needed, but hard—*plaf! plaf!*—and convinced him to murder her chump husband in hot blood, Alex and I were in tears. As the other patrons looked up quizzically from their journals and sophisto urban weeklies, I asked Alex if she thought these humdingers were sexist or what.

Alex sighed mightily, then growled the magic words: "So what?" After a second, she corrected herself. "I mean, *and* what? I lived in Mexico City for three years and I am no fan of the whole macho thing, believe me. These comics don't just reflect machismo, they reinforce it. They do. They help keep it alive. But so many other things about these comics are even *worse.* I really dislike the way in which they show the poverty and the violence." She sifted through a jumble of librettos and leveled her Female Gaze at another issue of *Perverse Souls,* entitled 'The Libertine Trapped by Dope and Sex."

"Look at her navel ring and this guy's green hair," Alex laughed. "How can you not think that this is excellent?"

I asked Alex the easiest, and the hardest, question. Why do you like these comics?

"Because they're great," she said. "I keep them at home on my coffee table with my American comic books. The American comic I love most is by the Hernandez brothers. *Love and Rockets.* Beautiful stuff. I always leave *Love and Rockets* out for my guests to read because they enjoy it so much, along with *Eightball,* and stuff by Seth, who is so smart and so good. And here's what happens: Somebody comes over to my house and I'm still on the phone or finishing up something in the other room. When that happens I always hear, 'What the *fuck* are these?' from across the house. When I join my guest in the living room they're reading a historieta—always a historieta—demanding to know why in hell I have these laying out for anyone to see. Then they thank me for leaving them out. Historietas always get picked up first. They always get the most attention."

What is it about ghetto librettos that makes a Yank pick them up before he'll read more worthy art? One easy answer is Mexploitation. A middle class Yankee reading a lower class Mexican comic has Mexploitation seemingly built into the equation. So I plead guilty to this misdemeanor. But at the same time I want to dismiss the charge. One has to remember that Mexicans have an equally ravenous appetite for these hot comics. I know, two wrongs don't make a right—but the entire world, including Mexico, is guilty of Yanxploitation.

Any American who has endured an evening at any "disco" nightclub anywhere in the world, or has gaped at a "motto"-emblazoned, bespangled jeans jacket on a Euro tourist already knows that the rest of the world is now an even uglier American than we are. Soon, Mexico may be no different.

"What's really funny," Alex told me, "is that my Mexican friends who come from the educated, upper class never pay the slightest attention to these comics. They think I am crazy for reading them. But they all love the cheapest, most awful American pop culture. They listen to music that is so bad, so irritating, that I can't spend even two seconds on it. If it is total crap, they suck it right up. Even the advertising." Alex cringed. "It started to make me feel really uncomfortable about my own culture. What would you do if a reporter from a foreign country stuck a microphone in your face and asked you enthusiastically about Madonna, or Britney Spears? Even if it were possible to listen to one of her songs all the way through, what could you possibly say about the experience? If you put yourself in that position, you'll get a clear picture of what some Mexicans feel like when you ask them questions about these comics."

Together we considered a cyclone of bottles, skulls, pills, disembodied boobs and long-lashed eyes whirling around the head of a man screaming in agony. "It's hard for me to feel comfortable taking a firm position with these," Alex said. "I feel like I'm glamorizing something that's actually un-glamorous, or giving these comics more meaning than they deserve. How can I laud these terrible things? Especially me, as a feminist. Look at them." She riffled through the issue, stopping on every page I had flagged with a post-it note. "Tits are hanging out all over the place."

Two things about tits. Two big things. Alex and I had agreed earlier over the telephone that ghetto librettos begged the Yankee to do what 90 percent of Mexicans do—criticize the poor little books to death—or do what 90 percent of Yankees do—celebrate the books' outrageousness to no end. The boobs in these comics (not to mention the *nalgas,* or butts) embody a similar paradox. These women are objectified, to be sure, but they're objectified in such an outrageously big-assed, ass-kicking manner that it's tempting to see these women as fearsome, all-powerful goddesses. However, as my translator Eli Bishop shrewdly asked, "What about the back and waist injuries that are surely caused by this type of empowerment?"

"The new aggression is against men… For really powerful ladies, turn to the porn stories turned out by Toukán… One baroque situation after another shows men scrambling foolishly to satisfy the appetites of women who are smarter than they are."

—Lorna Scott Fox, 'La Vitrina'

Perhaps we shouldn't apply familiar notions about the gender war to ghetto librettos, because when we do, we get nowhere. In his article on sensaporno, Luis Tovar took what we might call the Typical Male approach: The sexual acts in these comics are relatively unimportant, he said. The power is what's important, and he damned the ghetto libretto for taking the side of the macho: "The important thing," he scolded, "is to see in what new, randy, and sexsational way the man can prove that he is still the boss."

As we might expect, a woman sees the opposite, with her eye toward the subtleties: "The new aggression is against men," Lorna Scott Fox asserted. "For really powerful ladies, turn to the porn stories turned out by Toukán… One baroque situation after another shows men scrambling foolishly to satisfy the appetites of women who are smarter than they are." José Luis Silva, a former historieta writer and comic book critic, said much the same. "These women are very aggressive, sexually speaking," he told Gregory Gransden. "Their men are like puppets. The men behave like machos, but they are defeated every time."[41]

The problem is, the subject matter in these books is so serious that you have to take them seriously. But

[41] If your Spanish is up to par, check out "Comics, Arte Masivo," Silva's collection of essays located at *to2.com*. There's a great essay about an old Mariño S&M comic and another on Mango's new title, *El Pistolero,* with lots of pictures throughout. Silva's site is where I found the color photo of the ultra-rare *Yolanda.*

Mujeres en Extasis, *No. 94. Mar. 2, 1998. ©Editorial Toukán. Drawn and painted by Rodmiro Vázquez.*

A PESAR DE LO MUCHO QUE RECHAZABA A SU YERNO, ERA LA ÚLTIMA PERSONA DE LA QUE HUBIESE SOSPECHADO.
¡OJALÁ QUE ARMANDO HAYA AVERIGUADO ALGO!
COCOA POPS
RIZZS
UNA HORA MÁS TARDE, DEL OTRO LADO DE LA URBE...
PÁSAME UNA CHELA, VOY A PREPARAR UN TOQUE...
AP-49

Almas Perversas, *No. 72, May 1, 1998. ©Editorial Mango. Written by Gami, drawn by Garmaleón, inked by Manuel Martínez García.*

they are so fucked up that you can't take them seriously. In this sense the ghetto libretto embodies the strength of the cartoon medium. It is an art form that still has the potential to be *subversive* (and I don't use that word lightly, if ever, when I talk about art). These books also embody the problem of the comic critic: You cannot explain these comics without making them out to be more than they really are, not to mention making them no fun.

"I'm with you one hundred percent on that," Alex said. "I really struggled with that in my *Voice* story, but I was able to get around it because my essay had to be so short. These comics are evasive. They're slippery. If you criticize them, you're automatically undercut by them. But if you approve of them, or laud them, you're also undercut by them. I don't think there's much you can do except 'fess up to that."

"These so-called 'little stories' are… also about the fantasy of returning to small-town, traditional life."

—Alex Giardino, 'Voice Literary Supplement'

I confessed, and asked Alex to tell me again why she likes them.

"I like these comics because they're so over the top. The exaggerated form, and the color, and the drama—it's just so silly to me. Now, if this were a photograph, and not a painting of a woman being bound and gagged, about to be tortured, it would be really upsetting. But it's foreign to me, and it's a comic book, so it's hard to take it seriously. I just go right past the disgust and think it's really funny." Alex picked up the comic and began reading again. "Look at that," she said. "How can people say these aren't pornographic? There's hardly any nudity, but c'mon." Every few seconds a murmured *wow* slipped from her lips.

I gently pried Alex loose from the comic. We had ideological frameworks to deconstruct, I reminded her. A wickerwork of sociological ramifications to ramify.

"These are too much fun to take that seriously," Alex said. "They're over the top, they're fun to look at, and they usually have a good story. I don't know why I like these so much. I just do. There you go." She returned to her reading. "Maybe I can come up with a good answer for you later."

When Ernesto Priego saw my ad blurbing ghetto librettos in the last *Imp* he immediately wrote me to offer his assistance. "It's important you know that the kind of historietas you chose to illustrate your ad with are not what we 'Mexicans-into-comics-as-fine-art' would call 'beautifully sleazy,'" he wrote. "We call them mediocre and pathetic. There's no interest whatsoever in them if one wants to rate comics with literature and the plastic arts. Nevertheless, I have to admit that they are of enormous interest for social tourists, social anthropologists, brand-new, retro-kitsch, folk-opportunistic rock stars and businessmen interested in making quick bucks in spite of the people's cultural welfare."

Yikes. That's me?

Before long Ernesto wrote to say that he was coming to the Oakland area for a comics convention. When Ernesto arrived he had this red suitcase with him. The two of us tugged it up the stairs to my house, step by step, and Ernesto popped the latch. It was filled with ghetto librettos: *Perverse Souls, Beauties of the Night, The Law of the Street, I Confess, Tales from Jail, Sinister Stories, Immoral Women…* There were dense piles of alternative comic books created by his chilango amigos. There were Mexican mini comics and flip-books. A six-part video documentary about older historietas made for Mexican public television. Postcards. A poster. A tee-shirt. A baseball cap. Snug in the center was a jewel-like bottle of 100 percent agave tequila. "I had very little time before I left," Ernesto apologized. "But I managed to gather a few last-minute things. For you."

Ten or twelve hours later the tequila was gone, the moon and stars spun in the redwoods above, and Ernesto and I were stomaching a jug of el cheapo *charanda*—think lighter fluid—that I reserved for critical junctures such as this. On the kitchen table between us were crushed lime wedges, scattered salt, and a mess of sticky comic books.

"The only way I wouldn't like you to portray them is as an ironic, kitschy thing," Ernesto said. "Every single time Mexican popular art…" His voice trailed off.

"It is very important for your country to understand that Mexico is not only *como agua por chocolate.* Mexico is so much more than cacti, tequila, charros with sombreros, and machos eating tacos. We are fed up with cultural clichés, just as you are tired of being only ignorant and uncultured and eating nothing but hamburgers at McDonald's. We are all fed up with caricature."

In the comics between us, a uniformed Arizona border patrolman whipped a prostrate, half-naked migrant worker. A mariachi in a sombrero the size of a chandelier sang for four girls squirming at his feet. A shoeshine boy smoldered as he buffed a white woman's knee-high leather boots. Ernesto, I said. You know, there's really no way around caricature with these things. Through it, perhaps, but not around it. Anyway, I sighed, the truth is that we *are* ignorant, we are uncultured, and we do eat at McDonald's every day.

"That's it," Ernesto said. "That's the source of the problem. I feel the same way as people who think that these comics do not deserve an *Imp* issue. But I do and I don't. That is where my mixed emotions come in." He drank another shot and nibbled at a slice of lime, wincing almost imperceptibly. Then he made a confession: Earlier that afternoon he and I had gone to Comic Relief in Berkeley, where Ernesto redressed the trade imbalance his gifts for me had caused between our two nations. After I dropped him off at the casa with his payload of Yank comics, I ran errands on my own for a couple of hours. When I returned Ernesto was flat on his back, reading an issue of *Beauties of the Night.* He had closed the comic sheepishly. "I read historietas the entire time you were gone," he admitted. "For two hours I didn't even move from your couch. There I was with my brand-new Joe Sacco, my Dan Clowes, my Chris Ware, Jason Lutes, Adrian Tomine—but I didn't touch any of their books. All I did was read *Bellas de Noche* and *Almas Perversas.* I flew all the way to the United States and spent over a hundred bucks to get some of the best comics in the world, comics I can barely afford, comics I can hardly get in my own country, and here I am reading *Cariñosas.* It's ridiculous." His embarrassment gave way to a sort of recognition, and he nodded sagely in my direction, as though he were accusing me of a crime I had already confessed. "You picked a great subtitle for the cover of your magazine," he said. "These comics are definitely addictive."

"Historietas amount to one big Freudian slip."
—Alex Giardino, 'Voice Literary Supplement'

I reiterated my problem: You have to take these comics seriously, but you can't take them seriously.

"You must remember that these comics are not taken seriously by their readers, either," Ernesto explained. "In Mexican industrial comics everything is about *possibility.* That's why in Gregory's film I said that Mexican historietas are like gossip. They are this space for the socially repressed people to speak up. The more I read them, the more convinced of this I become."

Here Ernesto is on to something—perhaps the same something that other readers are on to. Gregory said that ghetto librettos "show a Mexico where dark, ugly passions bubble below the surface—class resentment, sexual guilt, fear and hatred of women, and the self-loathing at the heart of Mexican manhood." At the end of his film, he concludes, "Some see them as a mirror of the national psyche, a direct expression of the dark unconscious of the nation." Alex drew the same conclusion in her *Voice* article: Ghetto librettos, she concluded, "amount to one big Freudian slip." Lorna Scott Fox said much the same: Historietas, she wrote, are "unconscious speaking to unconscious." But Ernesto is skeptical of the idea that ghetto librettos are the general Mexican unconscious laid bare. Mexico is too complicated a country for such pat explanation.

"It is dangerous to speak like this," Ernesto said. "One cultural product cannot 'mirror' the whole of Mexican society; it's like saying that *Lethal Weapon* movies or hardcore sex web sites 'mirror' American society. I would not dare say that there is such a thing as a 'Mexican Psyche,' but in the case of historietas I do believe in a sort of contemporary, urban, working-class Mexican imagination, one that dwells on extreme violence, sleazy sex, and Catholic guilt. I'm not being Freudian. I really want to emphasize that. Mexico is a *very* classist society.

Relatos de Presidio, *No. 338, Apr. 24, 2001. Drawn by Mayorga, painted by Silva.*

Relatos de Presidio, *No. 344, June 5, 2001. Drawn by Félix Guzmán, painted by Effrén.*

Relatos de Presidio, *No. 383, Mar. 5, 2002. Drawn by Luis Velázquez, painted by Effrén.*

Relatos de Presidio, *No. 384, Mar. 12, 2002. Drawn by Bazaldúa, painted by Effrén.*

Yo Confieso, *No. 109, Jan. 10, 2001. ©Editorial Toukán. Drawn by Gerardo Sandoval, painted by Antonio Santillán.*

That's why I don't like to blame the stereotypes in these comics on the comics themselves. It's not like they are perpetuating these stereotypes. It's just a reflection of the reality. These comics are made by the lower classes for the lower classes. Both the artists and the readers tend to live in the same neighborhoods and grew up listening to the same slang, the same idioms, the same innuendo-infested conversations. These comics are made for the taquero, the shoeshine guy, the car mechanic, or the maid. These people are constantly exploited and molested by their employers, and in these stories they read about people like themselves who get to kill their employers. Of course, in the end the character will be punished, but still they are exciting. I think that these comics are *cathartic*."

"Industrial comics are ignored by everyone except their readers and their creators. The so-called 'educated elite' ignores them, organic intellectuals ignore them, and politicians ignore them."

—Ernesto Priego

He picked up an issue of *Tales from Jail*. "What I feel for this," he declared, "is firstly *respect*. I respect these! If there were polybags sized for this comic I would put it in a polybag." He lowered the comic and drank another shot. "Actually," he confessed with a tiny shudder, "I do put these comics in polybags. I know that these comics are supposed to be folded and stuck in your back pocket. They are supposed to be mistreated. I am sorry, but I can't do that. Not when I think about the conditions under which these artists have to work. They are drawing panels and word balloons and caption boxes. They are drawing *comics* and they have been completely overlooked by everybody around the world. There is a lot of quality work in these pages. I hope that you will say that in your issue, Dan. These cartoonists are very professional people. There is no way some obnoxious asshole like Todd McFarlane could deliver 80 pages of pencils every week. No *way*. And some of these artists are doing *three* 80 page stories a week! These artists don't complain about deadlines. They just deliver. You have to give them respect."

He picked up another libretto. The cover showed a man beating another man to death with a Volkswagen bumper. "I do like these," Ernesto said. "I do. I like them in spite of themselves. I believe in them because I believe in comics as a form. And I believe in these artists. I think that these guys have a lot of potential for telling stories. These writers and artists are insiders and they could tell some great stories if they had the power to do so, or if they were pushed or challenged by their editors. Mexico City is a treasury of stories. Twenty million of them. Everywhere you look you have a story to write."

Yes, but why do you read these comics now, in their current, semi-retarded state?

"Well," Ernesto blushed, "according to me, everything we do is oriented toward having sex. I've always said that Mexico is a culocentric society. *Culo* means ass. I call it *culocentrismo*. It's what makes the world go round. At least it's what makes Mexico go round. We have ass. All the jokes, the popular verbal creativity, the innuendo—we are all focused on ass. That's why some people think of machismo as a repressed form of homosexuality. It's also why some people think that women, because they hold the power of seduction, can hold real power even when they are otherwise oppressed." He rested his face in his cupped palms and sighed, slumping as if contemplating an ancient embarrassment. "You should also know that all my female friends tell me that I am a misogynist."

"I wish you had this issue of *Almas Perversas*," he said, brightening. "It's one of my favorites. It's a story that has been resampled and redone lots of times in Mexico. You have an over-40, mature, attractive woman and her sexy, 18-year old daughter. They have to kill the girl's father, who was a real bastard, so they are hiding from the federal police in a hut in the middle of the jungle in southeastern Mexico. When the police arrive they see the two women half-naked, washing their clothes in a river. The police say, Wow! Two women! The mother and the daughter say, Wow! Two men! They proceed to use each other sexually. The women take the active role, on top all the time, always telling the men what to do. Of course, the officers can't believe their good luck. But one day while they are having sex

one of the officers notices that the woman is wearing a shirt that used to belong to the dead guy they are searching for. He jumps up and says, 'It's you! You killed him!' So the women knock these guys out, tie them up, and enslave them. It turns into a bondage and domination story. The women refuse to give food or water to the cops until they beg for it, until they get another erection and satisfy the women first. This is a typical *Almas Perversas* story because the women are victimizers as well as victims. It is possible to read this story as saying only that women are evil, and we poor men are just their victims, but I'm not so sure that's all there is to it. Even though the law eventually sends the bad ladies to jail at the end, I'm not convinced that these comics tell only misogynist, macho stories.

"It's all mixed feelings. The people who make these comics feel guilty about them, but they also enjoy them a little. The people who sell them make a lot of money, but they also feel guilty."

—Ernesto Priego

"So what these artists and writers are doing is exploiting the clichés of Mexican culture. They are also exploiting the typical opposition between low art and high art. Because these comics are extremely popular and will never become anything else, nobody will ever notice them in a serious, critical way. So these guys can do whatever the fuck they want. Their comics are so unimportant that they are able to get away with it. Do you know Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian thinker? He has written about the carnival, and we might apply that to the historieta. Historietas are carnivalesque. In historietas there is an inversion of the traditional values, including macho values, and the oppressed has the opportunity to be the oppressor, at least for a little while.

"So there is so much potential. But it is restrained, because the editors assume that the readers want only pornography. It's like the superhero problem you have here in the States. The same stories are recycled again and again, and in the same *way*. It's not that I am against the subject matter. Truman Capote wrote about this stuff, but it was the way he did it that made the difference. It's the way the story is told. These are too melodramatic—melodramatic in the bad sense of the word."

"I think melodrama is actually a great genre," Ernesto added. "A *great* genre. Melodrama is so misunderstood. Today, melodrama is just taken to be a trashy, commonplace technique. But it can be so much more than that."

For the second or third time that night—morning, really—the Lawyer shuffled past in her pajamas, smiling blearily but warmly at Ernesto only before she slammed the bathroom door shut. Not to worry, I reassured a stricken Ernesto, pouring him some more charanda. It has nothing to do with you. I am moving back to Chicago as soon as this lease expires. Long story. Where were we? Melodrama. Right. Believe me, I agree with you one hundred percent.

Ernesto leaned over and whispered something that turned the tables: Why was I going to all of this trouble for these dirty little comics? What was it with me and historietas, anyway? It was late, we were drunk, so I told Ernesto the same confession I related earlier. I told him about the Peaches Pits.

"Promise me you will say that in your issue," Ernesto said gravely. "Promise me." I promised. Then Ernesto told me some things that he made me promise I would never quote. I begged him. "No," he said. "No. Don't. I have a reputation to take care of."

Meanwhile, back at the coffee shop, Alex was on a roll. "What is it about these comics that's attractive to me? What is it about parts of Mexico City that are attractive to me? I don't know if you want to quote me on this, but there is this group of foreigners who live in Mexico City. They wear Oaxacan clothing, they dance salsa, they listen to Silvio Rodriguez—a Cuban who sings odes to the Left—and they travel down to Chiapas so they can look at the Zapatistas. My patience with these people has been really, really tried. They think that this is an acceptable way to honor Mexican culture, particularly the Indian culture. My argument with these people is that they are romanticizing Mexico to an extent that should embarrass them. I've been to Chiapas, I've been to Oaxaca, but I don't dance salsa

EL ABORIGEN SE SENTIÓ VERDADERAMENTE DECEPCIONADO.
ERES UNA MALA MUJER, NO MERECES NADA BUENO.
¿MALA MUJER? ¡NO DIGAS ESTUPIDECES!
¡MÍRAME, BRUTO! ¿ACASO ESTE CUERPO ES EL DE UNA MUJER MALA?

La Ley del Revolver, *No. 179, Apr. 8, 1998. ©Editorial Mango. Written by Gami, drawn by Arturo Espinoza, inked by Manuel Martínez García.*

LOS DEDOS DEL INFAME SE HUNDIERON EN LAS CUENCAS OCULARES CON BRUTAL SALVAJISMO.
¡PÚDRETE, MENDIGO RENACUAJO!
Y ENTONCES SUCEDIÓ LO MÁS HORRIBLE.
¡ÓRALE, AL INFIERNO!
AP-25

Almas Perversas, *No. 97, Oct. 23, 1998.* ©*Editorial Mango. Written by Satriani, drawn by Julio Camarena, inked by Alejandro Rodriguez.*

and I don't want to go out with a bunch of Americans who dance salsa. It really irritates me. I spend most of my time at the markets, which are filled with historieta readers, as you know, so I'm also romanticizing Mexico. And most of my friends are artists who are scavenging around these markets, looking for stuff to use or play with in their own work. So we're all taking and we're all romanticizing. But historieta culture feels somehow different. Those foreigners would never have *any* interest in these comics. Why? Because these comics are not *magical.*

"When I was first in Mexico I was asked to speak at the National University so that students of English could hear my American accent. There was a British woman, an Australian woman, a Scottish woman, and this one woman from South Africa. God, I wanted to throttle her. She went on and on about how Mexico is so 'magical.' I will never, ever use that word to describe Mexico, I promise. Mexico is *real.* Mexico is so real that it is hyper-real. Mexico has competing realities that exist side-by-side, and these realities seem so contradictory that it's hard to accept them all at once. Poor Indians live right next to poor mestizos right next to serious, white, upper-class money. These realities create a lot of friction. But people still think that Mexico is so mystical, so 'magical,' that they can just go down there, take mushrooms, and walk around naked for three days in the desert. To me, people like this always use the word 'magical' when they are describing Mexico.[42]

"What attracts me to these comics is that they are so outside of that way of thinking about Mexico. They defy that 'magic.' They're really ugly. They're just flat-out ugly."

"{In these comics} one finds more human qualities and social relevance than appear in almost any art form, 'high' or 'low.'"

—Kurt Hollander, 'Poliester'

The ugliest thing about these comics is the fiendish glee they take in rape. Rape is a constant disgrace in almost all ghetto librettos, and at least two titles—EJEA's *La Ley de la Calle (The Law of the Street)* and *La Vida Excitante y Brutal (Exciting and Brutal Life)*—are basically all rape all the time. Their covers typically show a cowboy shoving his pistol into a maiden's mouth or a lowly worker unbuckling triumphantly before a sniffling, upper-crust school girl. I have found a few ghetto librettos in which a rape is averted or somehow unnecessary to the plot, but generally the comics average at least one despoiling per issue. The narrator never fails to express horror at these outrages, but the drawings often give the lie to his or her tut-tuttings. When you read a couple dozen of these little stories, an overall pattern is apparent: If the victim is a woman, and whiter than her brutalizer, the writer and artist linger longer on her torment. Basically, they glorify it.

Perverse Souls number 97, written by Satriani, is typical. This story, like so many little stories, begins in the Monster inside a parked car at night. Berta, a succulent young woman, is rolling around in the back seat with her boyfriend, Arturo. After Berta lets Arturo go all the way—"You are my life, my king!"—and they both gasp—"It is the glory!"—a naco with an earring yanks Arturo by his blond hair out of the car and begins kicking him in the head, aided by two sidekicks with tank tops and mohawks. The naco makes the peace sign and sticks it straight into Arturo's baby blue eyeballs, popping them both, then directs the mohawks to pull down Arturo's pants. Naco whips out a knife with frenzied relish and cuts off Arturo's nuts. To shut Berta up, he shoves Arturo's raw oysters into her screaming mouth and commences to punch the freshly-gelded, howling Arturo again and again in his blood-spurting groin. Finally, Arturo croaks. When at last the cops arrive, Berta sobs the assassin's name: Leonardo Garnica, a jealous ex-boyfriend. Leo gets 14 years, and he swears that he'll make Berta repent for ratting him out.

Now our stage is set for action. We next see Berta in her dirt-floor home, scrubbing the blood from her clothes. Gabriel, her adored and blond younger brother,

[42] Bernal Díaz wrote that the conquistadors' first sight of Mexico City "seemed like an enchanted vision… Indeed some of our soldiers asked whether it was not all a dream." *The Conquest of New Spain,* circa 1565.

is helping her. "The whole world knew that Gabriel was a homosexual," she narrates—as though Gabe's fuchsia tights weren't clue enough—"but I did not care." Unfortunately, the two mohawks who outran the cops do care. Gabriel is sashaying down the street one afternoon, clutching his pink purse, when the two punk rockers pull up in their taxicab, grab Gabriel, and zoom him back to their cinder block hideout in the so-called Belts of Misery encircling the Monster. There they strip Gabriel, bend him over the bed, and manage through their laughter to whistle in Nicholas, their salivating black mastiff. Nicholas rapes Gabriel doggy-style.

"Rape is always conspicious when the comic is dealing with chauffers, bricklayers, workers and gardeners."

—Adriana Malvido, 'Revista Mexicana de Comunicación'

Afterward, Gabriel limps home and through mascara-streaked sniffles tells Berta that the mohawks have promised to kill him—unless Berta agrees to a "conjugal visit" with Leo in the jailhouse. Berta can't de facto kill her own brother, so go she must. First she is ogled by the portly, mustachioed guard at the gate. Then she is strip-searched and prodded with a billy club by the smirking bull dyke in security. Finally she enters Leo's cell, mortified. Leo hops from his cot and drops to his knees before her, worshipping her rigid, white body with his tongue. Berta trembles with revulsion and hatred, but as Leo works her over and over with his wet words and his expert tongue an involuntary gasp finally escapes from her lips. Leo leaps happily to his feet. I knew it! He smacks her—*plaf! plaf!*—and throws her ass-up on the cot. She cries, What are you doing, you brute? "The same thing my dog did to your brother," Leo snarls, sliding into her and plaf-plafing away. "Feel me, precious! Tell me if I'm not better than that imbecile you let put his hands on you!" Berta can't say a word. This is the most disgusting thing that has ever happened to her. This is the worst thing that has ever happened to her. This is the most tremendous thing ever. It was never like this with Arturo! When she comes, it is like an electric shock that lobotomizes her, leaving her speechless with revulsion, guilt, and the desire for more.

Soon Berta is at the jail as often as the rules allow—just to keep you extra safe, she reassures a tormented Gabriel. But when Gabriel spies Berta borrowing his face powder and his eyeliner to doll herself up before yet another visit, he realizes that a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do. He slips into a wig, falsies, and a red miniskirt and pays Leo a little conjugal visit of his own. At first Leo demands to know who the hell Gabrielle is, but after a few strokes under the chin Gabrielle has Leo purring like a pussy. Gabriel whips off his wig, whips out a gun, and blows Leo's brains out. Berta cries, Gabe, why? Gabriel hangs his head with noble shame. "I had to save you from the claws of that outcast."

Grateful Berta gets Gabriel a good lawyer and soon she's visiting him every day in the pen. Eventually she gets Gabriel released and she and her gay angel walk arm in arm toward freedom, in the form of a waiting taxicab. "The nightmare was over," Berta says. "It was time to rebuild our lives and try to forget the cruel past that had condemned a pitiless, perverse soul."[43]

If you've called bullshit on the moral of this little herstory, I'm right with you. *Leo* is the perverse soul? Leo is just plain evil, and Berta is the perverse soul. That's the moral. Ironic morals like this admit oodles more perversity than politically correct, Puritan cultures like ours are comfortable confessing. The number of women who enjoy being raped is unquestionably the most loathsome thing about ghetto librettos. These are not harmless, housewife fantasies, but something at a more deep, hateful level. Their insatiable appetite for rape seems to be an appetite for *revenge.* The question is, revenge for what?

In a word, everything.

"I like to think about Mexican culture in terms of its national ironies," Alex said. She picked up a penny from the tabletop. "For example: we strictly separate

43 "Maldita rata enjaulada: Aun en el tambo, bien que se la surtía," *Almas Perversas,* No. 97, Oct. 23, 1998.

¡EL CANIJO CHUCHO ANDA BIEN JARIOSO! ¡HACE MESES QUE ESTÁ EN AYUNAS!
POR FAVOR... NO...
¡NO SEAS RAJÓN! ¡VAS A SENTIR BIEN CHIDO!
¡HASTA VAS A PEDIR MÁS!
AP-47

Almas Perversas, *No. 97, Oct. 23, 1998. ©Editorial Mango. Written by Satriani, drawn by Julio Camarena, inked by Alejandro Rodriguez.*

La Ley del Revolver, *No. 315, Dec. 4, 2000. ©Editorial Mango. Drawn by Rafael Gallur, painted by Dinorín.*

church and state, right? Yet 'In God We Trust' is stamped on every single one of these. It's on our *money.* This is the kind of irony that really tells you something about a culture. The morality in these comics may seem ironic, or totally opposed to all the perversity in them, but they're not so diametrically opposed if you see that they actually extend from the same, overarching value system. What we're calling the 'sleazery morality' is deeply Catholic. I think that in Mexico there is a curious and profound relationship between religious morals and sexuality. Morality and sleazery are not opposites; they are really just points on the same continuum because Mexico has *married* sexuality and religion.

"That's why I think *Perverse Souls* is such a perfect metaphor. It really captures the social or cultural 'meaning' of historietas. These comics are retellings of Mexico's basic, national myth, which goes like this: The white invader, Cortés, raped the Indian maiden, Malinche, who gave birth to the first Mexican. So rape gave birth to Mexico. Fifty or 60 years later, the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared to an Indian and showed him the way to be saved. It's important that the Virgin appeared to an Indian, because it brought the Indian and the European back together, but for healing this time. Have you noticed that the Virgin of Guadalupe has the form of a vagina? If you haven't, you really should take another look at her. This Virgin gave salvation to these raped people. So sexual violence leads ultimately to salvation. The perversely born are eventually rescued through morality. That's why the stories cannot separate sex from the moral.

"In Mexico this story of rape and salvation gets retold in countless ways, in ways that each class can approach. The working class gets it in a comic book, which doesn't require much time, money, or literacy. Because the stories have the drug-addled prostitutes, the struggling market vendors, the tattooed thug and the ingenue newly arrived from her pueblo, the myth gets renewed and revitalized for the modern world. It's no different and no more violent than the way our own culture replays violent Greek myths over and over again."

"By the way," she concluded, "I certainly didn't come up with all these thoughts on my own. I'm just taking most of my ideas about this from a book called *The Buried Mirror,* by Carlos Fuentes, that involves a lot of the basic myths of Mexico. It's a great, beautiful book."

A Little History

"**Myth is a past** with a future, exercising itself in the present," Fuentes wrote. "The problem with national stereotypes is, of course, that they contain a grain of truth, but by now the constant repetition has blurred it. The text is there, loud and clear, but the context has disappeared. To restore that context can be both surprising and dangerous. Do you merely reinforce the cliché? Not if you reveal, both to yourself… and to a foreign audience, the deeper meanings of cultural iconography, of intolerance and cruelty, and what they disguise. Where do they come from? Why are they real and persevering?"[44]

Writing about these persevering stereotypes *is* dangerous, especially for a gringo like me. I might get my ass kicked. Octavio Paz can say that Malinche was the first *chingada,* the first violated mother, making all mestizos *los hijos de la chingada,* sons of the motherfucked.[45] But this is almost like saying *nigger.* They can say it but you can't. Although you will hear Mexicans say *chinga* this, *chinga* that, all the time, watch how you use it, white boy. Calling a Mexican guy an *hijo de la* you-know-what might be the most offensive thing you can say. Don't do it. But know that the mythical mestizo does think of himself, at some metaphoric level, as the great-great-great grandson of a bitch. If Malinche is the mother of Mexico, bashing her is practically Mexico's national pastime. In most Mexican's eyes, Malinche is the Eve who willfully wrecked Paradise and has no excuse but her evil. For most people, the fact that Malinche was raped by Cortés fails to cut the mustard.

44 Carlos Fuentes, *The Buried Mirror,* Mariner Books, 1992, p. 16.

45 Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude,* Grove Press, 1961, pp. 85–87.

Some say that Malinche must have *enjoyed* being raped. Why else would the Mexica Indian—described by even the outrageously racist Spaniards as "outgoing, meddlesome, and beautiful"[46]—become Cortés' lover after he raped her? Why else would she serve as Cortés' translator—his *lengua*—at every stage of his lengthy campaign to conquer Mexico? Why else would both Aztec and Spanish accounts of the slaughter clearly show her right in the thick of it, using her forked tongue—fluent in Mayan and Náhuatl—to help the European invaders lie, cheat, and steal the entire country out from under Moctezuma? As Cortés' chronicler, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, noted, without Malinche's help the conquistadors could not have pulled it off. Even with their guns, crossbows, and horses the band of desperadoes was hopelessly outnumbered by the largest, most powerful, most warlike empire in America. Malinche's notorious talent for oral deception led her children to coin a word in her dishonor: *la Malinchista,* the traitor, the son of a bitch who sells out Mexico to the braggadocious invaders. An ad for the comic *Malinchistorietas*[47] best embodies this *puta,* or whore, archetype. We see the saucy gal joyously showering her globose bazooms under a waterfall (while wearing skimpy, fully feathered, yet strategically placed Indian regalia, of course). The ad teasingly proposes that Malinche shook her earth-momma ass so well for Cortés that she was a "Cortés-san."

Malinche, as drawn by an anonymous Aztec artist in the Lienzo of Tlaxcala, circa 1550.

Groan. That's the common level of discourse about Malinche. In po-mo retaliation, some scholars who rail against the *puta* view have recently crowned Malinche as the First American Feminist.[48] A grain of truth is also hidden in this caricature. First, the girl did have game. As Michael Wood noted, "In a sense she manipulated events. She seems to have had more freedom and power than any other woman of her time, from either of the two cultures."[49] When you consider what Malinche's own people did to her, her wanton treason turns out to be justified revenge. The Aztecs routinely blood sacrificed people from her hometown of Tabasco by cutting their hearts out and eating their bodies.[50] Malinche owed no loyalty to the Tabascoans either, especially her own parents, who sold her into servitude in the first place. Cortés was ambitious, exotic, and he had a nice horse—the first horse Mexicans had ever seen. No wonder a teenage sex slave ran away with him to become La Malinche. After Cortés won the war the lout dumped her, and some sources[51] claim that she killed Martín, her only child by Cortés, just to get back at him. Some say that killing her baby proves she was a *feminista* archetype. La Malinche was a spunky cold Medea.

Ouch. There's no low people won't go to in this mess. Trying to take a side in this conflict is like trying to take issue with a ghetto libretto: Either way, you're not going to win. When you damn Malinche you excuse slavery, imperialism, and cannibalism. When you champion Malinche you excuse slavery, imperialism, and torture. It is safe to say that Mexicans will be arguing about these fucked-up parental figures for as long as there are Mexicans. Malinche's story is a mixed-up story—a *mezclado,* or *mestizo*—story, and it is the mother of all these little stories.

46 Fuentes, p. 111.

47 This is an untranslatable triple groaner formed from *Malinche* and *historieta* with *chiste,* or jest, squeezed in the middle.

48 "U.S. Latina feminist scholarship has transformed her into an iconic canonical figure of feminism," U.S. Latina/o Perspectives on *La Malinche,* University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Aug. 26–28, 1999.

49 Michael Wood, *Conquistadors,* University of California Press, 2000, p. 33.

50 Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs,* Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 91–95.

51 Humilce Novas, *Everything You Need to Know about Latino History,* Penguin, 1994, p. 61.

Almas Perversas, *No. 77, June 5, 1998. ©Editorial Mango. Drawn by Bazaldúa, painted by Silva.*

Las Chambeadoras, *No. 55, Oct. 30, 1996. By Bazaldúa y Silva.*

Las Chambeadoras, *No. 256, Oct. 4, 2000. By Bazaldúa y Silva.*

Las Chambeadoras, *No. 277, Feb. 28, 2001. By Bazaldúa y Santillán.*

Las Chambeadoras, *No. 286, May 23, 2001. By Bazaldúa y Silva.*

When a writer uses a myth outside of its original context, we say that he has adapted the myth. The first page of every one of Mango/Toukán's little stories says that it is an *adaptación* and credits this adaptation to Migorg Bertini, Boris LaGarde, or Norman Klimt. The book credits the other two men with the "original idea" and a task described as "special collaboration." Because Bertini, LaGarde, and Klimt generate the stories which the argumentista and *dibujante* must flesh out, this mysterious trinity can help us to understand these comics.

I typed e-mails in my stilted español, addressed to each of the three, and sent them to the e-mail address listed on Mango/Toukán's masthead. I am still waiting for a reply. I printed obsequious requests for an interview and mailed them to Mango/Toukán's offices in Colonia Del Valle. I might as well have mailed them to What Cheer, Iowa.

"The directors of these publishing houses are difficult to locate," reported *La Crónica de Hoy*. "They don't take phone calls, and when you finally get them directly on the phone, they say that they can't talk. They say that they have 'too much work to do.' Nor will they provide sales figures, which are 'confidential.' What's more, they refuse to discuss their workplace at all, citing 'office politics.'"[52]

Should you telephone their offices, and should your Spanish be as poor as mine, their secretaries will hang up on you.

For his documentary, Gregory Gransden managed to get inside EJEA and talk to an editor named Juan Garcia. "These comics have always been criticized by the middle class as being trash literature," Garcia says. He shrugs. "Maybe they're right. I used to be prejudiced, too. When I was in journalism school I used to criticize them. At school they told us that historietas were written by sociologists and psychologists who tried to plant subliminal ideas in them that would make their readers submit to authority." Then Garcia reads from one of EJEA's comics in a devil-may-care manner:

> **"One of the cultural defects of the Mexican man is that he aspires to have all the trappings of an American. He wants his women to be tall, white, supermodel types, whereas real Mexican women are short, dark, and fat. But this is what our readers want."**
>
> —Juan Garcia, EJEA editor*

A proper man and woman united by their tranquil marriage find themselves stone broke. In order to pay their bills, the couple has to open their home to boarders from outside the village. These boarders are college girls—blonde college girls—one of who performs aerobic exercises in her new landlord's face while he seethes and wrenches at the pipes beneath her stopped-up sink. Finally the hubby snaps. Abandoning the faulty plumbing, he rips off his apron (which reads *Macho-T)* and throws himself at the girl. When she resists, he rapes her. The wife discovers the two brutally coupling and, misunderstanding the situation, pushes the girl and kills her accidentally. Here comes the moral: Macho-T accuses his wife of murder and threatens to turn her over to the police—unless, that is, she promises to help him molest the remaining girls.

At this point in his indifferent delivery of the story, Garcia smirks. So do I, every time I watch the film. Gregory and I agreed that Garcia's impish nature captured the essence of the ghetto libretto.

"I *hate* that guy," Ernesto said. "The way Garcia talks is so typical. It's so obvious from his accent that he is a guy from a typical, upper-middle class, private university—not a meritocratic university, a mediocre university. He's just doing these comics because he saw a way of making a quick buck. He could just as easily be selling paper cups or toothpicks. Anything! He is an ignorant guy who drives a nice car and makes lots of money publishing these comics. But he thinks he doesn't belong to the same class as his readers. He thinks he's above the people who are making him rich. I think he's despicable. Him and his class." Ernesto caught his breath. "I am sorry," he said. "It is because of assholes like him that Mexican comics are the way they are."

* Gregory Gransden, interview with Garcia, Mexico City, 1999.

52 Hector León Diez, "La gran industria del dibujo directo, las mujeres irreales y las pantelas mínimas," *La Crónica de Hoy,* Nov. 24, 1996.

In his *Crónica* article, Diez wrangled a tidbit out of Mango/Toukán by briefly speaking with Leonor Rey, the director of their line of *popular* (i.e., ghetto libretto) comics. When Diez asked Rey why her comics were the way they were—all spicy crime and horny suspense—Rey said that she and the publishers were "dubious" about taking on any different themes because, in her opinion, "there is too little professionalism among our authors and cartoonists."

"That is *bullshit*," Ernesto said. "It is true that the historietista is enslaved. It is true that he works under very hard conditions. And he might say, 'What I do is not Art,' or, 'I am embarrassed of what my daughter will think of my work when she grows up.' That is one thing. But these people are still artists. Everybody works hard on this. Very, very hard. Sometimes they have only two days to produce an entire, 80-page comic. Two days! If they were given American-style deadlines, like three months or whatever, they would deliver some *great* stuff.

"You must see for yourself, Dan. Come to Mexico City with me. I promise I will take you to some cantinas downtown that are crowded with cartoonists, journalists, and writers. You will see. These people are not willing to lick anyone's feet for money. They are hard working, working-class people, and they have got the dignity."

Wait a minute, I said. You can introduce me to the guys who make these comics?

"Sure," Ernesto said. "You can talk to Zenaido Velázquez." He sifted through the pile of comics between us and found an early issue of *Tales from Jail*, printed with the old-fashioned, brown, *mediotono* ink. "This is Zenaido. The guy who inked this issue. Now he inks for *Almas Perversas.* His wife works there too. Zenaido is a good and very respected friend to me. He and I can talk about anything. We can talk to him about working for Mango and Toukán. He knows Bazaldúa and Silva. He knows everybody. With Zenaido's help, I bet we could get Bazaldúa and Silva to do an original, painted cover for your *Imp*."

I was so dumb struck that Ernesto mistook muteness for indecision. "Of course you will want to pay Bazaldúa y Silva some good money for a painted cover," he said, "but other than that, it will be inexpensive. You can ride the trains and buses and eat with me at cantinas. At these cantinas we can eat for free, as long as we buy beers. And it will be safe," he stressed. "It is safe, and I will be with you. You *cannot* understand these comics until you have been to Mexico City."

The Mexican Comic Book Is Dead.

Long Live the Mexican Comic Book!

When I saw a million lights of Mexico City winking beneath the airplane, I returned my tray table to its upright and locked position. Half an hour later I was still waiting for a word from the cockpit about our landing, or for the plane to begin descending. I knew the Monster would be big, but I had no idea it was *that* big. After I cleared customs, a friend of Ernesto's drove us down darkened streets to the house Ernesto shares with his parents. At every intersection we blew through the stop light. "Dan," Ernesto said, "welcome to Mexico City. I have a lot planned for you."

The next morning, as we walked toward the UNAM campus, Ernesto and I passed a comics shop that bore a startling name. "*Imp* Comics," Ernesto groaned. "Yeah. For many years it was called Comics S.A. and everybody shopped there. They carried a wide range of American comics and European albums. You could even get Fantagraphics-type books there. Then they changed their name to Imp, and they started to suck. Now it is a terrible shop. Nobody goes there." A giant-size Spider-Man clung to the front of Imp, along with a sign that read, *Going out of business.*

I sat in the back of Ernesto's classroom and eyed his students from behind that week's issue of *Perverse Souls*. It was the first day of summer school, and Ernesto was exhorting a dozen stupefied freshmen to gear up for discussing the differences between Paul Auster's novel,

AQUEL ERA UN DÍA CUALQUIERA. ME DISPONÍA A IRME A LA CHAMBA, AL IGUAL QUE MI MADRE...
ADAPTACIÓN: MIGORG BERTINI
COLABORACIÓN ESPECIAL: NORMAN KLIMT
ARGUMENTO: J.J. SOTELO
AP-1

Almas Perversas, *No. 198, Oct. 20, 2000. ©Editorial Mango. Written by J.J. Sotelo, drawn by Garmaleón, inked by Rolando Martiarena.*

Almas Perversas, *No. 182, Jul. 30, 2000.* ©*Editorial Mango. Written by Chimal, drawn by Garmaleón, inked by Artemio Catarino.*

City of Glass, and Paul Karasik and David Mazuchelli's comics adaptation of the same. Nobody spoke. Ernesto broke the silence and asked his students what comic books they had actually read before registering for his class: *Maus? Kaliman? Chanoc? La Familia Burrón?* Finally, one student raised her hand a bit above her shoulder and squeaked, "Garfield?"

After class Ernesto led me to a cantina, where he drained his first beer and mounded himself above it, muttering something into its emptiness about Something Fucking Something. Give the kids time, I said. What about that one girl, the brown-haired one with freckles I was talking to after class? You know—the cute one? She seemed bright. She seemed like she was really into your class. She said that you were her favorite professor.

"Andrea Pixie," Ernesto sighed. "Remember in Oakland I told you about her?"

As I recalled, Ernesto and Ms. Pixie were walking down the street one day, hand in hand, when they bumped into some guy who wouldn't stop glowering at Ernesto. Ernesto asked Ms. Pixie if she knew who in hell this stranger was, and she admitted that she did: He was her boyfriend.

"Right," Ernesto said. "That's her. That's Andrea Pixie. Now she has enrolled as a student, and she has registered herself in *my* class."

You were right about these comics, I said. I never understood them until I came here. Ernesto raised his beer and dinged it against mine. He said, "When I told you that I had a reputation to protect, I did not tell you that it was a *bad* reputation."[53]

Plotting our route through the Monster was a cinch. Mexico City maps its subway stops as a string of icons in panels, one for each stop, reading horizontally. Intersecting trains of icons run vertically. As our train pulled forward, the mural painted on the wall closest to our car progressed with us, so that I saw the war against the Spaniards, the Yankees, the French, and Villa's and Zapata's Revolution rush by in sequence. "Comics are the way most of us learned how to read," Ernesto said. "They are like, in our cultural blood." We took out the glossy librettos we'd purchased at the station kiosk and began reading. Ernesto nudged me and pointed out one of our fellow passengers, who was swaying slightly from side to side and studying his own little story. Ernesto said, "These comics are keeping our country literate."

"Many people say it's cheap, low pornography, but I think the historieta is simply a medium of entertainment. You read it, you toss it in the trash, and that's enough."

—Enrique Calderón, EJEA writer*

We disembarked near Taller del Perro, the Dog's Workshop, a collective studio where Mexico City's best independent cartoonists work. The Perros are Ricardo Peláez, José Quintero, Edgar Clément, and Frik (pronounced "Freak"). When we arrived the Perros were bent over their drawing boards, living up to their moniker. They put down their pens and brushes and gave us a traditional Mexican welcome. For me, a coffee table book: the best of *Nota Roja,* along with copies of all of their own books.[54] For Ernesto, a bear hug and a headlock that escalated into a fireman's carry around the studio on Clément's brawny shoulders. After the formalities wound down, I produced a stack of ghetto librettos and asked the independent cartoonists what they thought of these "industrial" comics.

They read the librettos aloud so rapidly and laughed so raucously that I couldn't make *cabeza ni rabo* of the uproar. One familiar word stood out, so I asked, What does *güey* (pronounced "way") mean again?

"Same as in English," Clément beamed, sidling next to me. "I am standing 'by the güey.'" This line brought the house down, where it generally stayed.

* Fátima Escobar, "Creadores de Comics," *Revista 'H',* Oct. 1999, pp. 96–97.

53 He was *joking* when he said this, people.

54 It is a shame that I am devoting this issue to ghetto librettos and not to the more noble work of the Perros. Ricardo Peláez's trade paperback is called *Fuego Lento;* José Quintero's is *Buba;* and Edgar Clément's is *Operación Bolívar.* They and Frik have short stories in *Sensacional de Chilangos,* a self-published anthology of work by independent cartoonists. For more information, email the Perros at *tallerdelperro@hotmail.com* (en español, por favor).

"Boris LaGarde," Peláez pronounced. Rolling the words around almost obscenely on his tongue, he sang, *"Migorg Bertini."*

Yes, I said—Bertini, LaGarde and Klimt! I have to meet these men. Do you know who they are? Do you know where I can find them?

"They don't exist," Peláez said. "They are so *obviously* fake names." He read aloud the first pages of several librettos to general merriment—"I loved teaching anatomy class at a private university"—and eventually plopped the comics down on his drawing board. He and the Perros looked to me, as though I were the one who held the answers here. "These are trash," Peláez said, looking almost pleased.

"These are for the lumpen," Quintero declared, with no hint of condescension. "The worker."

"There's a lot of talent in this industry… there are many who are true artists. You can visit their home and see that they've done some great work. But they would be dying from hunger if they devoted themselves to art alone."

—Enrique Calderón, EJEA writer

Clément stopped wrestling with Ernesto and assumed a grave posture, wrestling with his English. "These are folk art," he said. "If you are trying to apply academic standards of criticism to these, you will fail."

Everyone nodded, so I did too, dumbly.

"But," Peláez said, "these comics are more honest now, in the last five years. Before, they were never allowed to show the fucking. Now all they do is fuck and fuck and fuck. They no longer pretend to be anything but what they really are. They are the best thing to give you a psychological, or sociological, understanding of the typical Mexican man."

Quiet descended on the Dog's Workshop while the Perros paged obligingly through my comics—*Like I Care! I Confess,* and *What a Scam!*—and in this quiet, I found myself growing embarrassed. Quintero asked me politely, Why was I interested in these little stories? I found that I had no answer to Quintero's question. Clément slid my librettos across the table and, without necessarily meaning to, answered Quintero's question for me.

"These comics are becoming more and more American," he said.

The next day Ernesto and I met Zenaido Velázquez Fuentes at a downtown restaurant. If I have learned one thing from arranging to meet cartoonists for interviews in cafés and restaurants, I have learned to search always for the most normal-looking—the *suspiciously* normal—man in the crowd. Amid the lunchtime hubbub stood a handsome, Indian man dressed in straight-leg chinos and a crisp, peppermint button-down, with a lemon sweater draped and tied around his shoulders. I would not have been surprised had he been holding a wooden tennis racket, rather than the paper shopping bag that hung from one hand. The man broke an even, white smile and approached our table, handshake extended. Zenaido! Mucho gusto! We dug into hot steak sandwiches and drank dark beer as our conversation went deeper into comics. Our eyes and our questions traveled around the table in a semaphoric blur of Spanish and English, with Ernesto struggling valiantly to translate.

"Zenaido started inking when he was 15 years old," Ernesto said. "He is 50 now, so he has been working in historietas for 35 years. The verb Zenaido is using for 'work' is *maquilar,* which is like the 'sweat boxes.' Is that what you call them? The sweat shops. That's it. It means to produce industrial, or chain labor. Under the publisher's tight schedule he can ink one episode, 80 pages, every week. But that is when he is working only twelve or fourteen hours a day."

Only?

"Yes. He is saying that other guys are able to sweat two issues of *Almas Perversas* in eight days. That is 160 pages, about 400 panels, in eight days. He is not sure how many hours per day that takes them."

I tried not to stare, but I did stare. I also gaped. Zenaido leaned forward and shrugged his shoulders, holding his palms up as though modestly accepting the absurdity of the situation. "Eighteen hours a day?" he grinned. "Twenty?"

"The system gets guys to work all day, every day,"

AQUEL DÍA, CHAMBEABA DURÍSIMO EN LA FÁBRICA DE ROPA. TENÍA QUE SACAR EL PIPIRÍN PA MIS CUATRO CHAMACOS...
ARGUMENTO: J.J. SOTELO
ADAPTACIÓN: MIGORO BERTINI
COLABORACIÓN. NORMAN KLIMT
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Almas Perversas, *No. 201, Nov. 10, 2000. ©Editorial Mango. Written by J.J. Sotelo, drawn by Garmaleón, inked by Rolando Martiarena.*

21 Poco después, la distraída señora temblaba frente a la caja... (GISELLE SUDOROSA Y CON GESTO ANGUSTIADO, APARECE FRENTE AL MOSTRADOR DE COBRO EXTENDIENDO UNA PANTALETA QUE RECIBE LA EMPLEADA QUE ESTÁ DEL OTRO LADO DEL MOSTRADOR)

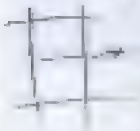
Giselle: C-Cóbreme esta prenda, pero rápido, por favor.

Empleada: Sí, señora.

22 Sus nervios se crisparon aún más cuando volteó hacia los probadores. (BAJO EL UMBRAL DE LA ENTRADA VEMOS A DORIAN SALIENDO CON SONRISA SATISFECHA MIENTRAS SE ACOMODA LOS PANTALONES CON LAS MANOS CON LAS QUE SUJETA LAS MEDIAS QUE LE QUITÓ A LA EMPLEADA)

Dorian (PENSANDO): ¡Vaya, no estuvo fabuloso!

23 (EN PRIMER PLANO APARECE GISELLE QUE VOLTEA CON GESTO ANGUSTIADO HACIA UN LADO DONDE VEMOS QUE SE ACERCA DORIAN MIRÁNDOLA MALICIOSO MIENTRAS SE GUARDA LA MEDIA EN LA BOLSA DEL SACO. EN SEGUNDO TÉRMINO LA CAJERA METIENDO LAS PANTALETAS EN UNA BOLSA).



Giselle (PENSANDO): ¡Ay madre mía, se está acercando!

24. De pronto sintió sobre su oreja un aliento que la estremeció de pies a cabeza. (EN MAYOR ACERCAMIENTO VEMOS QUE DORIAN SE LE ACERCA AL OÍDO MIRÁNDOLA PERVERSÓN MIENTRAS QUE ELLA SE QUEDA DESCONCERTADA).

Dorian: ¡Hola, muñeca, déjame decirte que tienes unas medias preciosas!

26 (AHORA DE FRENTE VEMOS QUE DORIAN EXTIENDE LA MANO Y LE METE UNA TARJETA DEBAJO DEL BRASIER MIENTRAS QUE GISELLA VOLTEA A MIRARLO ESTUPEFACTA. EN SEGUNDO TÉRMINO LA CAJERA MIRANDO DESCONCERTADA).

Dorian: ¡Pero si quieres unas mejores buscame!

Giselle: ¿E-Eh?

27. (EN PRIMER PLANO VEMOS QUE GISELLE, BOQUIABIERTA SE SACA LA TARJETA DE ENTRE LOS SENOS ANTE LA MIRADA ESCANDALIZADA DE LA CAJERA. EN SEGUNDO TÉRMINO VEMOS A DORIAN ALEJÁNDOSE)

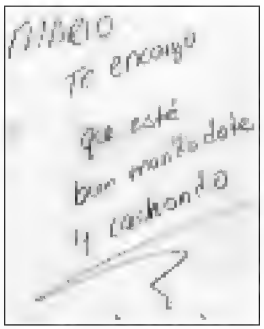
Giselle: ¿O-Qué le pasa?... ¡s-ese tipo está loco!

Cajera: ¡Qué barbaridad, le hubiera dado una bofetada!

Script for Delmónico's Erotika, *May 2002. ©Editorial Toukán. Written by Marco Nápoles, edited by Verónica Vásquez.*

Ernesto said. "He says the best artists are used to it, and once they are in this routine, they can't stop. They are making ten thousand pesos per week, like a thousand dollars American. Good money."

Zenaido reached into his bag and drew out a couple dozen Mango/Toukán comics. "For you," he indicated. When I made an awkward show of protest, Zenaido waved me off. "Don't worry," he said. "I have tons."



"Zenaido says that his sons are not proud of what he does. They all read things like *Spawn,* which he cannot understand because the art in them is so bad. He says that he would like for his family to know what he does. His household knows, but not his extended family, his father and his grandmother. They are from Oaxaca, in the country to the south, and they do not know that comics are related to sex. He says that in the past he could tell people that he is a comic book artist, and all the boys and girls in his family would gather around the drawing table to watch him work, and it was okay. As you say, 'No problem.' But now he cannot do that. Now he has to keep the door to his studio locked, because all they do now in comics is fuck."

Zenaido shook his head slowly. *"Coger y coger y coger."*

"He says he disagrees with the way sex is treated in these stories," Ernesto continued. "The editors and publishers enforce the sex content so that it is always morbid. The editors found that if they make lighter, less aggressive stories, their sales go down. But if they show more breasts, and make the language more vulgar, they sell more. Incredibly more. So now they only want more and more, emphasizing the dark side of sex again and again."

Zenaido handed me a manuscript, laser printed on a thin, almost translucent paper, like onionskin or foolscap. "The editors command the scripts, which are then given to the artists," Ernesto translated. "From this script, the penciler must do breakdowns for the editors to judge. And the standard they use is how provocatively you portray your women."

"The cutest and the spiciest," said Zenaido.

I studied the editor's notes to the artist, which were penciled throughout the margin of the manuscript. Ernesto leaned across the table and translated some of them for me. "Mario, make it really extreme. Really raunchy, or hardcore. This note is dictating the characteristics of the girl. Twenty-four years old, long, wavy hair. Very naive gestures, very innocent-looking. *Muy benota,* which is like, very attractive, very voluptuous. Make her young and angelic." I pointed to the next note. Ernesto craned his neck painfully and tried to translate. "She knocks her up with a fist? In the face?"

Zenaido rummaged in his bag. "The *Almas Perversas* Zenaido is inking right now is about a lesbian couple," Ernesto said. "They are perverse souls because they are lesbians. Zenaido disagrees with this treatment, and with this always being the treatment." Zenaido produced a thick stack of illustration boards and handed them to me. The top board showed two nude women in bed, moaning and kissing. The caption read, *I never felt guilty about being a lesbian…*

"That's a stack of original *Almas Perversas* illustrations," Ernesto whispered. I dampened my napkin and took care to wipe salsa from my hands. "Do you realize," Ernesto said, his voice growing louder, "that you have at this moment the original artwork for an issue of *Almas Perversas* in your own hands?"

I know, I said. I know. But what is *Zenaido* saying? Ernesto pointed at the *muy benota* girl licking her girlfriend's *muy benota* butt. "That girl there, Martha, is the repentant lesbian."

I noted that Martha didn't look too repentant. Zenaido smiled a bit. "That's the truth."

This story's plot—if you can call it that—consists of Martha and her pal slithering in and out of each other's nooks and crannies while gasping out a running commentary on the deliciousness of each one. Then two street punkers break into the room and take turns raping the girls. The punks eventually buckle up and crawl

out the window from whence they came, leaving Martha permanently traumatized: How could she have been a lesbian all these years? Martha pulls herself together, renounces her sapphic ways, and proceeds to beat her girlfriend to death with a two-by-four. The End. This is the worst historieta I have ever seen, I said. The story is almost like Yankee pornography—the whole thing takes place in one bedroom.

"When Vicente Fox was elected, everybody in the industry panicked," Ernesto translated. "Fox is a conservative, so the publishers were afraid of moralistic censorship under this right-wing government. But they soon realized that it was just the same old shit, only more so. They have realized that now there will be no censorship at all. So they have made the comics even more morbid, more excessive, and now they are selling more than ever.

"Still, the penciler and Zenaido have carefully designed this story so that they show exactly what is happening without actually showing it. Zenaido is quoting Armando Bartra. Armando Bartra says that because Mango and Toukán cannot show genitals, the pornographic element is not really in the pictures. It is in the vulgarity of the text, the rudeness of the language and story. The punks are calling the girls *zorra* and *perra*, which is like *bitch*. The text is much more aggressive than the illustrations. Even the most hardcore American comics, like Eros Comix, are nowhere near this nasty."

Es la verdad, I said. This is the most perverse, cynical comic book I have ever seen. I calculated the number of traveler's checks left in my wallet and asked Zenaido how much money he would require to sell one of these original pages.

"He can't sell it," Ernesto said. "He would if he could, but Mango and Toukán will not return original art to its creators."

Why not? I demanded.

"They burn it."

"Because Mango and Toukán cannot show genitals, the pornographic element is not really in the pictures. It is in the vulgarity of the text."

—Zenaido Velázquez, paraphrasing Armando Bartra

If I have learned one useful thing from reading ghetto librettos, it's how to cuss in polite company: *desgraciados, malditos, hijos de la perra.* Zenaido chuckled and raised his glass to me. *¡Salud!*

"The publishers claim that they burn the artwork because they cannot afford the space to store it, but that is obviously not true. There is an underground market here in Mexico for some of this art. Rafael Gallur is a famous historietista, and somebody—not necessarily the editors or publisher, just 'a big guy'—is selling Gallur's originals on the black market. But Gallur will not get any of the money."

Jesus H. Christ, I groaned. You guys need a union.

"That is what Zenaido fought for," Ernesto said. "He says that it is probably immodest on his part to say this, but from 1973 to 1989 Zenaido was a union activist as well as a cartoonist. He organized and directed the SOMEHI, the Mexican Society of Cartoonists, in order to defend against these injustices. For three years he fought very hard on behalf of SOMEHI but with almost no results. He was already overworked, obviously, and he eventually grew overwhelmed and physically ill from the struggle. It became impossible to continue in this manner, economically and morally, because he had to support his family. So he had to give it up and just go back to drawing. There are still about 300 historietistas active in SOMEHI, but all their current leader does is organize homages to himself."

As we gathered our things and prepared to leave the restaurant, Zenaido took my hand in his and shook it warmly. "He is glad to meet an appreciator, or a connoisseur, of Mexican comics," Ernesto said. "Bazaldúa has your cover ready and we will meet him in Coyoacan tomorrow to exchange it for the money. If you want, Zenaido says that we could go to the Perros' studio beforehand and scan these *Almas* originals for you before Mango burns them. He can also bring some penciled pages done by his friend, Mario Guevara, that are quite good. If you want."

Artwork for Almas Perversas, *May 2001. ©Editorial Mango. Written by Javier Vargas, drawn by Salvador García, inked by Zenaido Velázquez.*

¡V-VÁLGAME, QUÉ BELLEZA DE MEDIAS?
¡S-SI ME VEN ME PUEDEN CORRER!
EN UNOS MINUTOS, EL SUJETO HABÍA SEDUCIDO A LA EMPLEADA.
¡OLVÍDATE DE TUS JEFES Y VE NOMÁS QUÉ TERSURA!
DE 4

Artwork for Delmónico's Erotika, *May 2001. ©Editorial Toukán. Written by Marco Nápoles, drawn by Mario Guevara.*

I wanted, I wanted. "Good," Ernesto said. "He says he will pick us up in his car and drive us."

Never before has one gringo worn out the word *gracias* so quickly, and so thoroughly.

"De nada," Zenaido said. It's nothing. When I tried to pay for lunch, Zenaido stopped me from paying. I insisted, but so did Zenaido. Please, I said. It's the least I can do: a beer and a sandwich. I whispered to Ernesto, Is this a macho thing?

"No," Ernesto said. "You are our guest. It is a Mexican thing."

"We take up the issue of human passions and deal with them in an old-fashioned style. Even the lettering is done by hand, not by a computer."

—Leonor Rey, Toukán editor*

The next morning Zenaido picked us up and drove us to the Dog's Workshop. We spread out the *Almas Perversas* pages and the script and pencils for an issue-in-progress of *Delmónico's Erotika,* penciled by Mario Guevara. The Perros gathered round and raised a chorus of *carrilla*—cheeky teasing—every time Zenaido turned a page. I pondered the embarrassment of riches before me until Peláez plucked a page from the pile, confirmed that it was saucy enough for all, and began scanning it on his iMac. Clément told me that he and Peláez knew Zenaido from the days when they themselves had worked in what they call The Industry.

"But our art styles did not fit," Clément said. "The editors said to us, no—you have to draw the bubble butts, the gigantic asses."

"And you have to draw the pretty faces on all the girls," Peláez said. I asked if any other artists had broken out of the industrial ghetto.

"No," Clément said. "Half the historietistas do not want to draw anything but big asses, and the other half do not know how to draw anything else. Historietistas are often from the *campo,* the country, without college or even high school. They are not taught, culturally speaking, to look at comics as Art."

"Zenaido is the exception," Peláez said. "He has read Crumb, he has read the European albums."

"Moëbius is a close friend to Zenaido," Ernesto said. "Zenaido brought Moëbius to Mexico, and when Zenaido vacations in France, he stays at Moëbius' house. Moëbius told him, 'You cannot go on like this, man. You must do something to get out of this situation you are in.'"

Peláez handed me a compact disc with all the images burned safely onto it, ready for the printer. Quintero cracked open a six pack, sliced a lime, and raised a toast: "To the *historieta maquila!*"

As we drank to the sweatshop, Ernesto leaned into my ear and said, "See, Dan, this is the thing. This is it. Here we have the historietista and the independistas, the 'low' and the 'high' coming together as artists. These two worlds are not supposed to mingle in Mexico but here they are, saluting each other in mutual respect and admiration."

¡Salud!

One more thing, Zenaido said. He unrolled a sheaf of tabloid-sized comics. They were originals, he explained, he drew years ago for the sports paper, *Ovaciones,* on the condition that they be returned to him after printing. I translated the title: "Patricide, in a Drunken Moment." Yes, Zenaido said. The editors wanted him to adapt lurid, moralistic stories from the tabloid press—the *Nota Roja.* This one was about a man high on cocaine and alcohol who killed his parents and repented only when it was too late.

Let's get another CD, I said. Keep that scanner hot.

"No, no," Ernesto explained. "This page is for you, to keep and take back to Chicago with you. It is a gift, a thank-you for all that you are doing."

For all that *I* am doing? This historieta project of mine was turning out to be an exercise in irony after all. But what I said to Zenaido, as warmly as I could, was, *No tengo palabras.* I have no words.

It's nothing, Zenaido said.

Our transaction for the cover painting went down eerily like a drug deal: meet a stranger at a predetermined location, examine the goods, and hand over

* Diez, "La gran industria."

hundreds of dollars in exchange for immediate, guilty bliss. I had relayed to Bazaldúa through Ernesto and Zenaido that what I wanted was the most typical *Perverse Souls* cover. I wanted ass, drugs, and death. I wanted nude, x-rated women, but they had to be portrayed in a modest manner. I wanted a blowjob that was blatant, yet not explicit. As you can see, I got that and I got more. A lot more. Bazaldúa did the telling background details, such as the burning tire and the TV antenna blighting the free-for-all battlefield. Silva added the tee shirt—of course an imp would wear red—to the mandatory cowboy boots and macho mustache. Best of all, Baz tilted the eyebrow and subtly curled the corner of *el impio*'s mouth, giving him the knowing smirk that is the hallmark of the *hombre picaro*—the low, sly, vile rascal. As we beheld Bazaldúa y Silva's painting, Ernesto crowded beside me, beside himself with awe.

"Because of its ephemeral and disposable quality, because of the irresponsibility and speed with which it's produced, I think that we can find in today's historieta symptoms of certain types of Mexican thinking... that we would never find in more sophisticated media."

—Armando Bartra*

Oscar Bazaldúa Nava looks like Frank Frazetta might have painted him—picture Conan, with that grim, Cimmerian set to his jaw—but with a haircut and a polo shirt, and the reduced posture and tired, yet sharp eyes that only come from years bent over a drawing board and laboring with finely-pointed tools. Bazaldúa told us that he had studied for a year and a half at a commercial art school, but had to quit when the school collapsed in the 1985 earthquake. He then assisted Sixto Valencia—the old master, of *Memín Pinguín* fame, currently working on the thinking man's ghetto libretto, Toukán's *The Plumed Serpent*—for three years. Bazaldúa is 33 now, and he has been working in the comics industry for 15 years.

"He says that working for Mango/Toukán is very hard, very difficult," Ernesto translated. "Just to do one cover you must draw three or four layouts for them to choose from. After they choose one, they always make you modify it." Bazaldúa handed me the day's rejected layouts and told me that I should keep them, since I was so interested. When I protested that I couldn't possibly, Bazaldúa told me not to worry. He had tons.

I asked Bazaldúa how long it took him and Silva to do this *Imp* cover.

"About a day," Bazaldúa said, "more or less."

If you guys did this in one day, how many covers do you do every week?

"Five or six," Bazaldúa said. (Zenaido leaned over and whispered into Ernesto's ear. "Baz is being modest," Ernesto relayed. "It is more like eight.")

"He says that he likes working with Silva," Ernesto said. "Silva is good, very good. Silva is his real name, by the way. José Silva, no relation to the José Silva in Gregory's film. But Bazaldúa does not know Silva's second last name."

You guys do more than 400 paintings a year together and you don't know his last name?

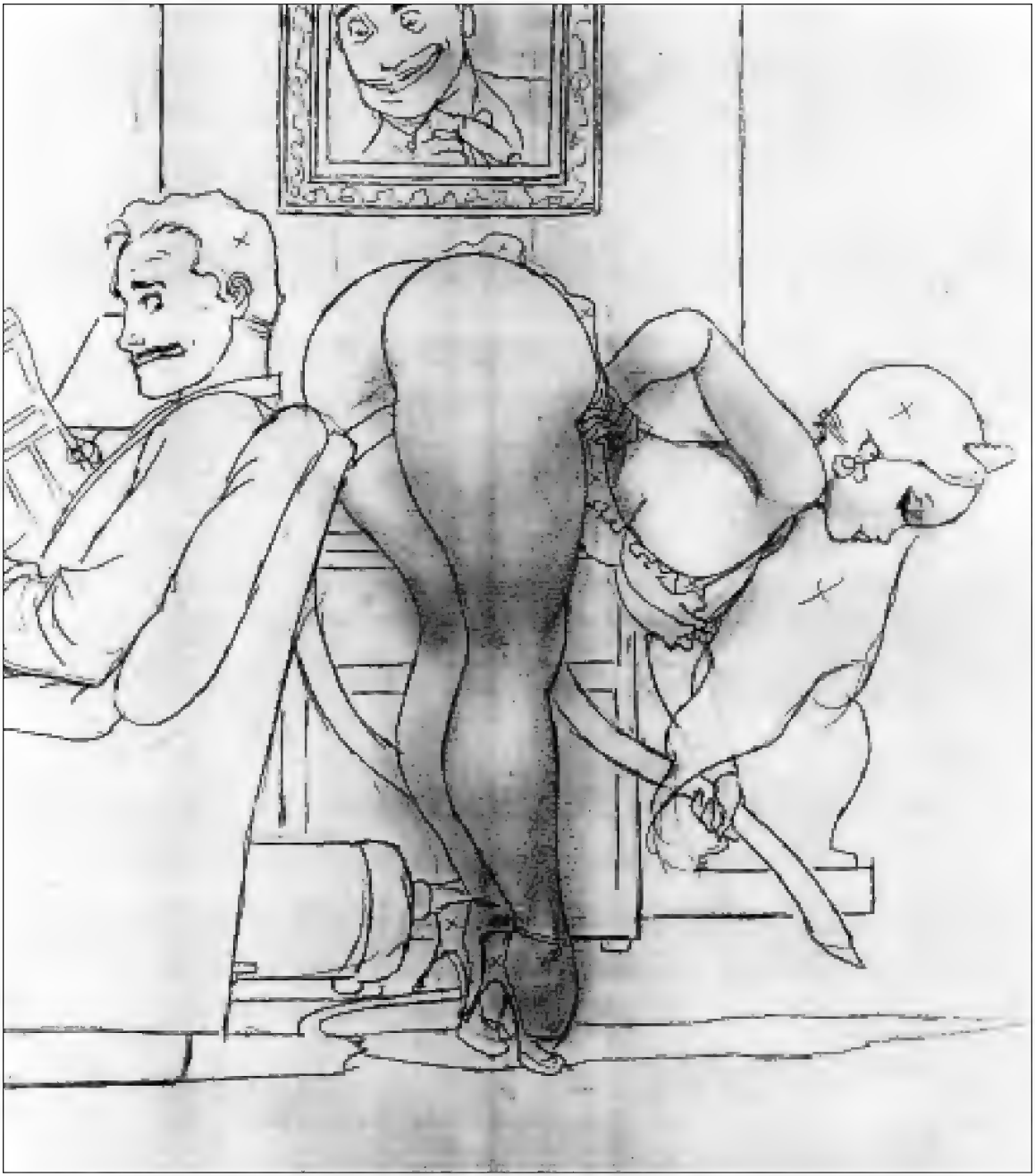
"No. Actually, he has never seen Silva. He gives his pencils to the editors at Mango/Toukán, and they take control of working with Silva from there. So even though they are partners, he does not know him. They arranged to do your cover through Zenaido, and through the mail.

"He says that he would like to draw the insides of the books, do actual comics, like Bernie Wrightson and John Buscema. In the past he did some comics but now he cannot really afford to. He only does the covers now, because covers pay the most."

I asked Bazaldúa and Zenaido what they thought should, or could, be done to improve the historieta industry. Zenaido's and Bazaldúa's eyes met for a second and they looked away with pursed smiles, as though loyalty compelled them to recognize humor in a joke long gone stale. They both began speaking at once.

"Mango and Toukán have the best artists because they pay the best," Ernesto translated. "So in terms of the drawing, there is a lot of quality. But not in the stories. Ángel Mora, whom they are calling the Old Master {see sidebar, next page}, has said that he has to draw

* Gregory Gransden, interview with Bartra, Mexico City, 1999.



Rejected cover sketch for a Mango/Toukán comic (probably Las Chambeadoras*), May 2001. Drawn by Bazaldúa.*

¡CHALE! ¿POS QUÉ BUSCA CONMIGO, OIGA? ¡NO ME LATE QUE ME ANDE SIGUIENDO!
SÓLO VINE A TRAERTE UNA "TORTUGA". ¡TE VES RE' FLACA!
¡QUÉ RICA! ¡ES CUBANA, HUELE NOMÁS! ¡MMMMAH!
AP-56

Almas Perversas, *No. 201, Nov. 10, 2000. ©Editorial Mango. Written by J.J. Sotelo, drawn by Garmaleón, inked by Rolanda Martiarena.*

stories that he—and they—can't relate to. They wish they could do stories about their own lives, or work in other genres besides morbidity and sex. But where? You have to understand that the publishers, like EJEA, Mango and Toukán are all really part of the same company. There is only one company. All the publishers are in it together, so the rivalries between these companies are just like family rivalries, like with your older brother or something. Zenaido is saying that Mango has a new comic book coming out called *Corridos Perrones*. Corridos are the Norteño music, ballads about drug dealers, with the adjective *perrones,* which is like saying, 'Hardcore Songs.' They take a Tigres del Norte song and adapt it to the comic book form. The publishers have discovered that this is a very successful formula. So what they do is create another corridos comic book—*Corridos Prohibidos,* which is like, 'Forbidden Songs'—before another company can copy their formula. By copying themselves before anybody else can, they saturate the market for these comics, like they have with the excessive pseudo-porn comics. This way, all the competition for readers stays within the same company."

I wondered if the best cartoonists, like themselves, Ángel Mora, and Sixto Valencia had ever considered getting together and starting their own historieta company, to publish their own work.

"They did," Ernesto said. "But they failed. The, uh, 'big guys' at these publishers also own the distributor, so the distributor boycotted them. They refused to carry their comics on the newsstands, so nobody could find the comics except in a few specialty shops."

Como los Estados Unidos, I said.

"Right. So they never had a chance. Zenaido is saying that he comes from the tradition of classic American comics: Will Eisner, Joe Kubert, John Severin. When Will Eisner came to Mexico City it was an amazing honor to meet him. Zenaido would like to do graphic novels like Eisner has. He wants to do a series of novels about San Antonio—from the battle at the Alamo to now, where you have 'the other conquest,' with Mexicans becoming Mexican-Americans. The way to do this is to form artistic collectives, like Taller del Perro,

Who is Garmaleón?

The best cartoonist in the industry. Considering the speed at which he is forced to draw, his work is *astounding.* His Mexicans actually look like Mexicans, and the honesty of his urban details is downright frightening. When you're in Garmaleón's comics you're inside the Monster in the hands of a maestro.

After studying the panel below I unscrambled the puzzle: Garmaleón is actually Ángel Mora. In 1959 Mora co-created *Chanoc,* which was translated in the film *Amores Perros* as "Tarzan." That's misleading. Chanoc was a good guy from the jungle, but as Lorna Scott Fox pointed out in *La Vitrina, Chanoc* was not really about the "virtuous hunk" it was named after. Chanoc's "drunken, devious, womanizing uncle…was the true focus of identification." In the first issue of Zenaido's SOMEHI magazine, *Mono de Papel,* Carlos Monsiváis called *Chanoc* "a sublime mockery… jeering at noble deeds by combining the knight and the knave, the superhero and the super-sly." The care evident in this panel from *Chanoc* shows why Ángel Mora now hides behind a pseudonym. It's a shame.

and print very small editions, like 3,000 copies. Zenaido says that is the future of Mexican comics."

But hardly anyone will see it, and you cannot make a living.

"Right. That is the thing. That is the problem. In Mexico you can make a living doing comics, but not the comics you want."

Como los Estados Unidos, I said. Unless you want to draw superheroes.

Bazaldúa reached into his shoulder bag and withdrew a stack of layouts. They were Batman layouts, but Batman like I had never seen him before. If you were to lock John Byrne and Neal Adams in a cell and force them to freebase shredded Frank Frazetta paintings until they had drawn Batman, you'd have something like Bazaldúa's Batman. It is the best Batman I have ever seen. I asked Bazaldúa who in Mexico had published this.

"Nobody," Bazaldúa said.

You just drew it to draw it?

"Es mi sueño," Bazaldúa said. It has always been my dream to draw Batman.

I implored him to go to San Diego, where the comics industry holds its annual convention, and show his layouts to Batman's publisher, DC comics.

"I already did," Bazaldúa said. "I went last year."

What happened?

"In San Diego you need more than skill," he said. "You need luck."

"These comics should be burned! They are trash. Somebody has to set some literary standards for the people, for the masses."

—The mother of Ernesto's friend Erica

After Bazaldúa excused himself—he still had a lot of work to get done that day—Zenaido took Ernesto and me to a *pulqueria,* where he purchased several large plastic bags of what looked like spit. Zenaido's wife, Verónica, pulled up in the Jetta with their eight-year old son, Oscar, in the front seat. We clambered in and off we went to the ancient city of Teotihuacán, to see the Pyramids of the Sun and Moon and have a picnic.

As Verónica captained us through the choked traffic, I hefted the first plastic bag and slopped irregular bursts of pulque onto the paper cups Ernesto and Zenaido feinted with. After some coaching from Zenaido, my aim improved and before long the three of us were not only wearing a bit of pulque but also the same smile. I don't know how to describe the effect of this fermented maguey juice except to affirm that the meaning of the word pulque—Náhuatl for "spit of the gods"—is already perfect. Pulque makes everything perfect. I found myself understanding spoken español more clearly than before; I also found myself speaking a little español with Verónica, with Ernesto as always translating the more complex passages.

Yes, I'm a chilanga, Verónica said. My degree and my experience were in more traditional publishing, editing books of sociology, but about five years ago I took an editorial job at Mango y Toukán because the money is better. And that is where I met Zenaido, the handsome freelancer who came in once a week to deliver his artwork.

It happened in the office, I enthused—just like in an issue of *Almas Perversas!* Zenaido closed his eyes, smiled, and nodded, humoring me.

"It is Verónica's job to read the scripts," Ernesto said. "She proofreads them and then gives the writers and artists direction." He leaned into my ear, mindful of young Oscar in the front seat, and whispered, "Her job also includes making sure the sexiness is in the scripts. The notes we saw in the margins of the *Delmónico's Erotika* script were hers. She was the one urging Mario Guevara to make it extreme, to bring the artwork up to the level of raunchiness that the publishers require."

When I asked Verónica if she liked working at Mango/Toukán, she raised one hand in between shifting gears, held it level for a second, and fluttered it. *Asi asi,* she said. The office has the usual politics and backtalking. There is a bit of ribaldry built into the job, but nothing she couldn't handle. The office atmosphere is very professional, and it has to be professional, because there is so much work that has to be done so quickly. The Flores brothers are sometimes difficult to deal with because they spend a lot of time hiding in their office. Germán and Jaime have a difficult time working with

PORQUE MAÑANA TEMPRANITO SERÁ PASADO POR LAS ARMAS. ¡SON ÓRDENES DE MI GENERAL HUERTA!
¿Q-QUÉ... ME VAN A FUSILAR?
ME SENTÉ SOBRE EL LECHO DE GRANITO Y AGACHÉ LA CABEZA COMO TRATANDO DE AHUYENTAR AQUELLA NEGRA PESADILLA.
¡NO, NO PUEDEN MATARME!
¿DESPUÉS DE TODO LO QUE HE PASADO, DEBO TERMINAR DE ESTA MANERA? ¡NO, NO PUEDE SER, NO ME RESIGNO A ACABAR ASÍ!

¡Viva Villa! No. 22, Sept. 29, 2000. ©Editorial Toukán. Written by Daniel Muñoz, drawn by Antonio Cardoso, inked by Zenaido Velázquez. Zenaido told me that this comic—about the life of Pancho Villa—was the one comic he felt good about working on. Unfortunately, the editors cancelled it. "People don't want revolution," they said. "They want sex."

¡ Miren, miren este mamotetro que acabo de leer: "chambeadoras" !
¡ Pornografía vil, veneno para las mentes cándidas de nuestros hijos !
¿ Tus hijos leen esa revista ?
Chambeadoras
¡ Horror al crimen !
¡ Primero los estrangulo en el Cañón de Juchipila !
¡ No puedo creer que hables como censor, Gerásimo !
65

Serpiente Desplumada, *No. 35, May 15, 1998. ©Editorial Toukán. Written by J.J. Sotelo, drawn by Sixto Valencia, inked by Jesús Jiménez.*

men, she stressed. That is the reason why all the freelancers are men and all the full-timers are women. The entire staff are women, and together they make the office work. That is what makes Mango/Toukán a good place to work.

"Ah, Dan," Ernesto said, draping an arm around me and giving me a rub. "Now you have found what you wanted. Now you can go home and say that this is not a misogynist industry after all."

Over the laughter, I inquired about Migorg Bertini, Boris LaGarde, and Norman Klimt. So these guys—the adapters, the "special collaborators"—then they are freelancers? The laughter escalated in harmony with a torrent of back-and-forth español which drove Ernesto to drop his head in his hands and shake it, slowly.

"No," he said, "they do not use pseudonyms because they are ashamed. But they should be." He took his chin in one hand and parsed out what he had gathered from Zenaido and Verónica, looking only slightly less perplexed than I. "The government has passed a law stating that artists and writers do not have to pay any taxes on the royalties they earn from the sale of their work. The government has done this in order to stimulate and encourage the humanities. So what the Flores brothers have done is invent these identities for themselves: Jaime Flores is Boris LaGarde, Germán is Norman Klimt, and Jorge is Migorg Bertini. They do this so that they can give credit to themselves for the 'original idea,' the 'adaptation,' and the 'special collaboration.' This way they do not have to pay any royalties to the writer, whom they only credit with the *argumento.* This way they are able to write their royalty checks to themselves. Jaime Flores can take a large tax write-off by making out a generous royalty check to Boris LaGarde. As Boris LaGarde, Jaime can cash this same check and, of course, pay no taxes on it. So the three of them pay almost no taxes at all."

When he finished translating this boondoggle, Ernesto's eyes closed and he slumped back in his seat. "Half my brain is in Spanish and half my brain is in English," he murmured, "but all of it is just worn out."

But the Flores brothers, I said—what's the word I'm looking for? How do you say "crafty?"

"Abusadora," Ernesto sighed.

"There are only about 15 or 20 people in this country who collect original Mexican comics. It's not like in the U.S."

—Ulises Mavrides, in 'The Dark Underworld of Mexico's Little Stories'

Zenaido observed the Monster creeping by. "There is a lot of money running through that place," he said. By now we were stuck in traffic in the *cinturones de miseria,* the Belts of Misery, that ring the capitol. A starveling in a Kappa Kappa Gamma sweatshirt—Peaches' old sorority—squeegeed our windshield. Verónica gave some coins and a rapid set of directions to Oscar, who handed the coins up to the man and told him, Thank you.

I asked Verónica and Zenaido about J.J. Sotelo, the thinking man's argumentista. Ah, Zenaido said, perking up, J.J. is my favorite. He is the best. He is very cool, very friendly, very humble. Verónica added that J.J.'s scripts are the best, no question. We always approve his scripts with no corrections. Everyone in the business wishes that more writers could write like J.J. Sotelo.

To that end, Sotelo has recently opened his own, quasi-official, university of the historieta: Taller Editorial de Comic, or TEC.[55] Ernesto chuckled as he showed me the brochure advertising Sotelo's school. The cover painting—in which I detected the unmistakable hand of Rafael Gallur—shows an enraged, hardbody Indian about to lock sinews with an equally enraged, ponytailed gringo. A svelte centerfold model wearing only feathers and a rawhide tassel or two imperiously watches the combat against a backdrop of crucified gringos rotting on their crosses in the desert heat. The headline reads, "Study a career that is different, passionate, and well-paying."

"This is so great," Ernesto said. "Listen to these requirements for admission. You must have 'experience in life.' You must also have the ability to 'parrot,' or

55 TEC is a pun, natch, playing off the prestige of a nearby, well-known polytechnic university, colloquially known as "Tech."

keep a conversation entertaining. They especially want *dominio del albur*—mastery of albur—and they warn, "We are *not* a literary workshop." The best part is here, at the end of their requirements, where they say *sin distinction de sexo*. All schools in Mexico have to say that they do not discriminate on the basis of gender. But the way Sotelo has put it, what it says is not only that, but also that you are *required* not to know what sex you are. You can study here only if you do not distinguish between men and women."

It was at this moment that the name of Ricardo Rentería came up, followed by an excited exchange of words between Verónica and Zenaido, too fast for me to catch any drift. I turned to Ernesto but he put up his hands, as though to stay clear. Ever since I read Rentería's story about the priest and the stripper, I'd noticed a few odd things about this writer's appearances. For one, I noted that in the page one credits, Rentería's name was always spelled out in full—Ricardo Rentería Lomelí—and typeset in a point size that dwarfed, and I mean dwarfed, everybody else's name, including Bertini et al. His name was printed so much bigger than everyone else's that at times it threatened to cover up the splash page action. I asked Verónica if Rentería was an egomaniac, a prima donna, or what.

In the rear view mirror, Vernonica's eyes checked Zenaido's. Zenaido shrugged and said, "I think he's a good writer."

"Ricardo's scripts are always a mess," Verónica said. "They require so much tinkering and revision. And there is so much misogyny and violence in his stories."

Now that is true, I said, leaning forward. J.J. Sotelo is the best writer, no doubt, and Ricardo Rentería Lomelí is the worst, in a guilty way. The amount of deceit, mutilation, and sheer perversity built into his stories was equaled only perhaps by Satriani, the cannibal family author, but without Satriani's happy endings. I could not bring to mind a single Rentería story that had a happy ending, unless you count the defrocked priest walking off into the sunset to spread hope. I couldn't express this in Spanish, so what I said was, basically, What's the deal with Rentería?

"In Mexico, the comic book was the most important form of literature in the 20th century. Nevertheless, the comic book industry developed on the margins of the cultural establishment—there are no archives, no documentation, no conservation efforts. There are no catalogs, no inventory… This is a lost tradition."

—Juan Manuel Aurrecoechea*

"He is gay," Verónica said, "but that is not his problem. His problem is that he is not out of the closet. Everybody knows that Ricardo Rentería is gay except for Ricardo Rentería." When Ricardo comes in to the office to pick up his check, she and Zenaido have both seen Ricardo's boyfriend waiting for him outside.

Zenaido said that homosexuality and bisexuality were common among writers and artists, as among all people, and it was a shame that people should have to hide it.

Yes, Verónica said. But Ricardo is not pressured to be homophobic—not by the Flores brothers and not by her or any other director. His scripts require a lot of editorial back and forth only because of his technical limitations as a writer, not because of their content. His stories are the way they are because they come from within himself. What happens to the men and women in them is always Ricardo's doing; it is a projection of his own mixed feelings.

"Like a perverse soul," Zenaido sighed.

"Oh, man," Ernesto said. "Maybe I should be a Freudian after all."

We didn't talk much about comics after that. I had to fly back to Chicago the next morning and Zenaido and Verónica wanted to show me what they loved about Mexico. They drove me to the pyramids, which we'll get to in a minute, and brought me another liter of pulque, flavored with celery, tomatoes, and clams. At a roadside tent they also fed me tacos *cabritos*—kid goat tacos—cooked over a campfire. When we dropped off Oscar

* Gregory Gransden, interview with Aurrecoechea, Mexico City, 1999.

Almas Perversas, *No. 170, Apr. 7, 2000. ©Editorial Mango. Written by Ricardo Rentería, drawn by Garmaleón, inked by Alfonso Martínez.*

Serpiente Desplumada, *No. 36, Jul. 15, 1998. ©Editorial Toukán. Written by J.J. Sotelo, drawn by Sixto Valencia, inked by Jesús Jiménez.*

at daycare, they took us for a spin through their own neighborhood, Colonia Martín Carrera.

"I have lived in Mexico City for my entire life," Ernesto said, "and I am ashamed to say that I have no idea where we are right now."

Zenaido smiled with a gentle, nearly melancholy pride. "Very lumpen," he said. "Very lumpen."

As night fell, my hosts drove me and Ernesto downtown to Garibaldi Plaza. "I am so glad that you want to come to Garibaldi," Ernesto told me as we neared the plaza and stopped for a red light. "None of my American friends would ever come here. Even a lot of my Mexican friends who are hip-hoppers or deejays think that I am crazy for loving this place." As I tried to gather the words *en español* that would express my commitment to new experiences, especially new experiences that involved live music and beer, I noticed a pair of men staring at us from the street corner. When they saw me staring back, they nudged each other and sprinted toward our car. A few more men followed them, then a few more, and within seconds we were surrounded by a mob of men in black pressed against the windows and pounding on the glass. They wanted us to get out of the car, now.

Dan Raeburn, *by Oscar Velázquez.*

We got out of the car. Zenaido handed one of the men a wad of money and said a few words to him. A bunch of the men dashed off and returned holding brass horns and guitars. A little spit, a strum or two, and then they burst into song: *The Chicagoan has a beard, but he is not a pussy…*

"Yeah," Ernesto explained, "you have a beard, not the mustache." When I pointed out that he too had a beard, and a professorial beard at that, Ernesto said, "Yeah, but you are white." He shrugged, totally unconcerned and enjoying the music. "Whatever. People probably think we are a couple."

A dozen or more bands of musicians clustered around the Plaza. One encircled a forlorn girl cradling a newborn as they roundly castigated in song the maldito who had left such a fine woman in such a fix. Another band formed before a pile of crumpled pesos and a tear-streaked man who stared at his can of beer as though he wanted to kill it. When the song ended the man flung down more money—"That's like a week's pay," Ernesto gasped—and the band obediently began again. I noticed one *joven,* or young man, serenading another joven who looked doubtfully into his beer. They don't have beards, I said. Ernesto studied the pair and pointed out the girl standing nearby, who looked equally doubtful. "No," Ernesto said, "the guys are best friends, but she only loves one of them back, so the lucky guy is singing to his friend, trying to cheer him up." We watched the trio for a while, and I said that this place was a treasury of stories. Everywhere I looked, there was a story waiting to be told. Ernesto nodded. He was happy, his mission accomplished. I don't know how many bands roamed Plaza Garibaldi, but before the night was through Zenaido and Verónica had hired almost every single one of them to play for us. By midnight I was trying to sing, *America may be made of gold, but a golden cage is still a cage.*

One last thing about comics came up when I was sitting under that roadside tent, eating goat. Little Oscar was doodling on his napkin with a Sharpie pen—his dad always carries a Sharpie—and looking up at me intermittently as he drew. Yes, Zenaido beamed, Oscar wants to be a cartoonist when he grows up.

"Como mi papá," Oscar piped.

Verónica leaned over and asked Oscar to play with her on a nearby swingset and carousel. The grownups needed to discuss grownup things. Before Oscar went off with his mom, he handed me my portrait.

Oscar knew me better than I thought. You could say he nailed me, right down to my essence. The kid's a born natural, I said.

We are saving as much money as we can, Zenaido said, so that we can send him to study at the school for cartoonists. No, not J.J. Sotelo's TEC. No. We want to send him to New York City, to study at the Joe Kubert School for cartoonists. Zenaido studied Oscar as the boy spun around the carousel with his mother, delirious with glee. I worry about him living in America, Zenaido said. Perhaps we will be able to arrange for him to study through the mail, through a correspondence course. I am fond of Americans, but I am not fond of America itself.

That's exactly how I feel, I said.

Then Zenaido spoke rather gravely with me about our life in the States. He was concerned that we all lived so far away from our families, that we would move away from our brothers and sisters, and for what? A school? A job? To only see your mother once a year at Christmas, to live with no real connection to the place where you came from, seemed sad and lonely to him. It seemed unnecessary. Frankly, he did not understand it at all.

Neither did I, I admitted, and I spent a year of my life studying a comic book called *Jimmy Corrigan* that was in large part about this subject: the way Yankees are, and how we got this way. I'd come to Mexico to investigate sex and violence in comic books but I found something that was the last thing I thought I'd find. I found something I never looked for because I couldn't even imagine it. I found myself on a picnic, talking about tolerance toward those who are different, saving money for college, and better pay and working conditions for parents. I found something we can't even say in the United States: family values, *real* family values.

I also found the family values of the Flores brothers, and I confess that I do find their family values amusing in a cynical, perverse way. But there will always be a struggle between bosses and their workers, and ultimately everybody who works for a living has to decide whose side they are on. I know whose side I'm on. That's the most important thing this explorer discovered down there and took home with him.

—A Little More History—

Zenaido climbed with us to the top of the largest pyramid at Teotihuacán. Teotihuacán means "the place where man meets God." The Toltec Mexica built this city to honor their god Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent, around the time that Jesus was hanging out with the other human sacrifices outside Rome.

There are a lot of little stories about Quetzalcoatl. One of the popular stories has it that one night Quetzalcoatl got so drunk on pulque that he fucked his sister. When Quetzalcoatl sobered up he was so ashamed of what he'd done that he killed himself. As his lifeblood poured out of him it spilled over some old bones, infusing the bones with life and creating the human race. Quetzalcoatl dedicated his afterlife to caring for the people he had created. Toltecs honored Quetzalcoatl's self-sacrifice and moral rebirth by feeding him a symbolic diet of sacrificed birds, snakes, grasshoppers, and butterflies, and by waiting for his predicted Second Coming in a *Ce Acatl* year, a year that comes only once every 52 years. The Toltecs died waiting. Around 700 A.D. they vanished. Nobody knows why.

The Aztec Mexica arrived not long after and retrofitted that old time religion to match their aggressive growth plan. They took Quetzalcoatl down a notch or two in the pantheon and began sacrificing to Huitzilopochtli, their Sun God. Huitzilopochtli did not want butterflies. He wanted human hearts, and lots of them. Every year the Aztec army provided an average of 20,000 captives, which the clergy cut open and fed to the victim's friends and relatives. At the dedication of Tenochtitlan, the massive city now called Mexico City, a team of priests blood sacrificed as many as 20,000 people in a row in order to impress the speechless leaders of surrounding fiefdoms.[56]

[56] My summary of the Toltec civilization and myth comes from Fuentes, *The Buried Mirror,* p. 109. My account of Aztec worship and cuisine is greatly condensed from Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs,* Cambridge University Press, 1991; Peggy Reeves Sanday, *Divine Hunger,* Cambridge University Press, 1986, and Barbara Ehrenreich, *Blood Rites,* Metropolitan Books, 1997.

AQUEL NEGOCITO NOS PERMITIRÍA REHACER NUESTRAS VIDAS Y OLVIDAR PARA SIEMPRE LA PESADILLA DE LOS TACOS DE CARNITAS HUMANAS.
¡UNA COSA SÍ LES JURO: EN ESTE RESTORANCITO DAREMOS DE COMER PURO PESCADO Y MARISCOS!
FIN
COLOR CROMIX
CORRECCIÓN DE ESTILO Y ORTOGRAFICA M. BARRÓN
AP-90

"ALMAS PERVERSAS" M.F. Año 2 No. 103 Diciembre 04 de 1998
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Almas Perversas, *No. 103, Dec. 4, 1998. ©Editorial Mango. Written by Satriani, drawn by Garmaleón, inked by Rolando Martiarena.*

Rejected cover sketch for a Mango/Toukán comic (probably Almas Perversas*), May 2001. Drawn by Bazaldúa.*

When Cortés and his conquistadors galloped up to Tenochtitlan they were horrified as well: all that gold, and not one ingot of it was theirs. Cortés had arrived at just the wrong moment, for 1519 was coincidentally a *Ce Acatl* year, and Cortés made the most of the resulting confusion. With Malinche's help Cortés explained to Moctezuma that he and his men were indeed the Second Coming of Quetzalcoatl. Cortés asked Moctezuma to wash up those yecchy temples, break out the butterflies, and hand over all his gold. It was on this last point that Cortés and his hired guns were truly insistent. When Moctezuma asked Cortés why he and his men were so hell bent on gold, Cortés sneered, "My men suffer from a disease of the heart which can only be cured by gold."[57]

Malinche translating, as drawn by an Aztec artist in the Florentine Codex, circa 1550.

Moctezuma proved uncooperative and died rather quickly under uncertain circumstances. Moctezuma's successor, Cuauhtémoc, refused to tell Cortés where the rest of the gold was hidden, even as Cortés fed him feet-first into a blazing fire. After that the Spaniards killed everything they couldn't eat, fuck, or sell, spread diseases to whomever and whatever was left, leveled the pyramids, and laid the foundation for modern-day Mexico City. Within a dozen years Spanish priests were using catechisms—morally instructive booklets—to teach the surviving Mexica how to attain eternal life. These catechisms were printed, sequential art that combined words and pictures to tell their story.[58] At the same time Mexica writers and artists created codices under the direction of Church officials. In these books they compiled eyewitness accounts of Mexican lives before and during the Spanish conquest. Their most famous and comprehensive book, the mid-sixteenth-century Florentine Codex, is typical. The artists sequenced their illustrations to indicate the passage of time. They also added a uniquely Mexican touch to the book by drawing a small bubble, or balloon, emanating from the mouths of characters who were speaking.

My first morning in Mexico City, Ernesto showed me the murals located in the Palace of Fine Arts. We saw David Alfaro Siqueiros' *The New Democracy,* in which a topless maiden busts free from her oppressors' chains. We saw José Clemente Orozco's *Catharsis,* in which an enormous whore laughs as the machinery of greed and corruption and dead bodies work their way in and out of her opened legs. At one point we found ourselves standing in awe before Siqueiros' *The Torment of Cuauhtémoc.* The painting shows Cortés' men feeding the last emperor into a bonfire while they force the Emperor's stricken wife and children to watch. I noticed a lone Indian woman painted among the phalanx of rigid Spaniards, rising up on her tiptoes. It was Malinche, trying to lick the ear of her conqueror.

Ernesto said, "It's a little like a historieta, no?"

The End

Detail from Diego Rivera's 1953 mosaic, A Popular History of Mexico, *Teatro de los Insurgentes, Mexico City.*

57 Wood, *Conquistadores,* p. 17.

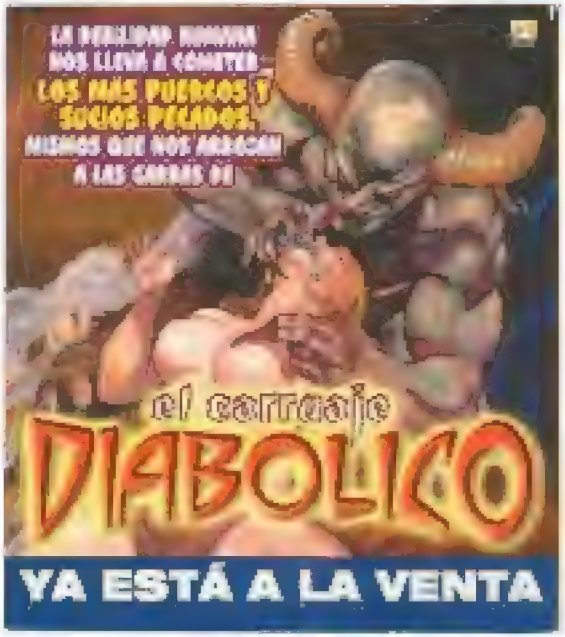
58 Aurrecoechea and Bartra, *Puros Cuentos,* vol 1, pp. 14–15.

Mango's Coming Attractions

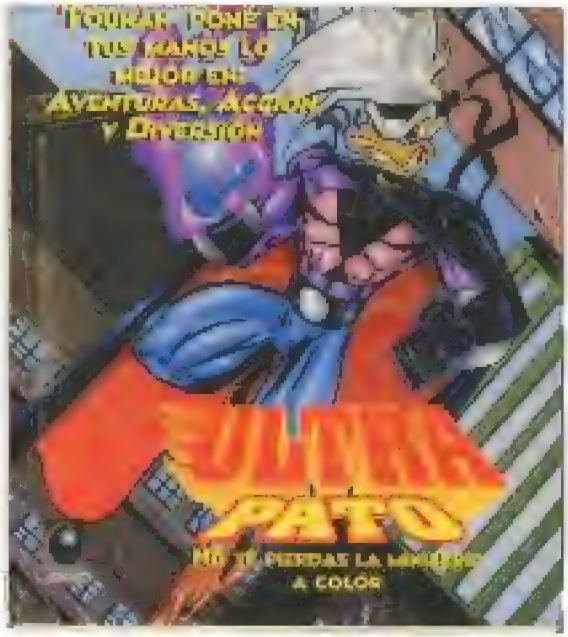
Que no te vean la cara con cualquier revistucha.
Éstas son las más chingonas sinvergüenzadas de "labregones", "atascados" y cabr...
¡Me Vale!
BÚSCALA PROXIMAMENTE

SI LOS DESEOS INSANOS NO TE DEJAN EN PAZ
Y NO PUEDES DOMINARLOS...
ESCRÍBEME, YO PUEDO AYUDARTE, SOY TU...
Consejera SEXUAL
...y de otras intimidades
PRÓXIMAMENTE

Nos dicen DESUBICADOS, DESMADROSOS E IRRESPONSABLES, pero hay que ser chavo para saber qué es...
juventud desenfrenada
SEXUAL ...intimidades


LA REALIDAD NOCIVA NOS LLEVA A COMETER... LOS MÁS PUERCOS Y SUCIOS PECADOS, MISMOS QUE NOS ARRojAN A LAS GARRAS DE
el carruaje DIABOLICO
YA ESTÁ A LA VENTA

Toukán's Coming Attractions



EJEA's Coming Attractions

"CON SU PROPIA SANGRE PAGARON EL PRECIO DE SUS INFERNALES EXCESOS. HABÍAN SIDO PARTE DE LA BASURA MORAL Y TERMINARON COMO LO QUE ERAN, UNOS LAMENTABLES DESPERDICIOS DE LA SOCIEDAD."
FOLIO 543210 FICHA No. 12
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FIN
COLOR CROMIX
CORRECCIÓN DE ESTILO Y ORTOGRÁFICA: Verónica Vásquez
AP-90

"ALMAS PERVERSAS" Año 2 No. 57 (Jan. 16 de 1998)
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LO PENSÉ MUCHO. PORQUE UNA VEZ ME PUSE EN MANOS DE DANIEL Y ESO ME CAUSÓ TODO LO QUE HE PASADO.
TENÍA PÁNICO DE CAER EN UNA TRAMPA Y ACABAR MÁS HUNDIDA DE LO QUE YA ESTABA!
YO CREO QUE ESO ES LO QUE MÁS GRUESO ME ESTÁ MATANDO, ¡EL NO SABER NI QUÉ ONDA!
CORRECCIÓN DE ESTILO Y ORTOGRAFICA. MIROSLAVA DUVAL.
JD-78

Juventud Desenfrenada, *No. 2, Apr. 3, 2001. ©Editorial Mango. Written by Sinclair, drawn and inked by Louga and Jorge Rodríguez.*

Words of PASSION

Please mail your confessions to me at one of the new, permanent addresses listed on page one of this issue.

While reading your issue on Chris Ware I was continually reminded of the following quote from Samuel Beckett, which a painter friend of mine has taped to his wall: "Fail, fail again, fail better."

—ERIC WALCZAK, NEW YORK, NEW YORK

I keep reading *Jimmy Corrigan* and pushing it away. I excuse myself by saying that I think I'll only be able to read it when I can read it whole (which may be true), but I think the truth of the matter is that I'm afraid of how the book makes me feel. It makes me feel my own hollowness, my own loneliness. I'm afraid of the truth of it, which is my own limitation, and not Chris Ware's. If the comic is cold, it is in exposing my own coldness. Art that evokes feeling, rather than enunciating it, is a painful challenge for most people. The mass of our cultural products (high art and mass culture both) tell us how to feel and let us feel vicariously. Work like Ware's puts us on the spot. It really is up to the reader to provide the emotion and complete the work. Tell Chris that when readers find his work cold and emotionless it is their failure, not his, that is described.

—BRIAN ZIMMERMAN, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

You *bastard! Imp* number 3 was everything I was trying to do with my lame *Print* article and fell miserably short of. How dare you produce the most exhaustive, brilliantly articulated investigation into Wareiana instead of me? Oh, the shame.

—CHIP KIDD, NEW YORK, NEW YORK

You people are dumb and sad and tired. If ever there was a comic that didn't need to be written about (to death), it is *The Acme Novelty Library*. I love it, you claim to love it, now shut the fuck up. Stay off Chris's penis. He can always masturbate if he needs to. And wipe your chin.

—CARLOS GODFREY, AUBURN, ALABAMA

While I appreciate your generosity in sending me another copy, free of charge, of *The Imp*, I must protest your publishing of my letters to you. I now find myself in considerable hot water by virtue of your latest "Letters to the Editor" section. I blame myself, mostly, for this predicament: I would not have aroused the ire of this prison's authorities if I hadn't broken the rules by typing out personal correspondence on one of the Education Department's computers. However, you've inadvertently compounded my problem by 1) hacking and editing my letters so that they appear to be little more than anti-prison screeds, when in fact they were mostly concerned with Jack Chick and his loony anti-Catholic religious tracts, and 2) publishing my letter at all: I had no idea that personal letters to you would be whittled down and published in your 'zine.

From the best of my knowledge, this is what happened: Someone in the mailroom noticed your Post-it note informing me that I'd "made the Letters section." This person then read my so-called "letter," was aghast, and forwarded a copy to Dean Walker, Superintendent of Marion Correctional. Mr. Walker, thinking I'd made some ridiculous allegations about his prison (which I hadn't), and, worse yet, typed said allegations on a prison computer (which I had)—well, let's just say that Mr. Walker was justifiably peeved. And I'm putting it mildly.

I have therefore been "written-up," and will lose my position as assistant to the Computer Class instructor. I will also most likely be transferred in short order to a work camp as punishment for supposed rabble-rousing. Mr. Walker and his associates understandably worry that I might be some sort of subversive bent on drawing attention to myself. As I am the least radical person on the planet—I mean, I voted for George Bush against

Bill Clinton, for heaven's sake—and terribly shy, I find their misconception of me to be extremely frustrating.

Please, in the future, exercise caution in editing letters, and try to discern whether or not certain letters should be published at all. Next time you're contemplating the editing and publishing of an inmate's personal letters to you, think of me on that work farm, picking row after row of field peas, and decide whether the impact of your editing considerations will be positive or negative.

As my incoming mail is now inspected, read, and contemplated, I must ask, somewhat regretfully, that you not send anything further to me. You are a talented guy, and I'm sure you never intended any of this to happen, but I simply can't run the risk of any further misconceptions and punishments.

—JOSHUA STANCIL #0594801, MARION, NORTH CAROLINA

I wanted to let you know I made my way through the No. 3 *Imp* this weekend—wow, there's a *lot* about that young'un of mine!—and found it a most informative and enjoyable read. I also learned some things, most notably the influence of Joseph Cornell, about whom, philistine I, knew nothing. So you twice-over educated me. I'm anxious to peruse Chris's collection of Cornell books on our next visit to his museum/apartment.

Also enjoyed Dan Kelly's piece. We've—my husband, David and I—met Dan only a couple of times, like him enormously and are pleased he and Chris will be formally related in the not-too-distant future. I was not aware of Dan's penchant for ragtime, a delightfully mind-addling pursuit and one that will, as Chris told me yesterday, provide them amusement down the decades as they "bald and fatten."

So, thanks for the good read about "the smartest cartoonist on earth." I've thought that about him for a good many years now, and pride myself on having discerned his artistic talents that long-ago morning in his crib. By the way, I burned the sheets and hosed the crib. Chris, my thumbs gingerly in his armpits, went in the shower. You see, it really *did* happen. Cheers!

—DORIS WARE MCCALL, SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

I recently introduced a friend of mine, an R. Crumb fan, to Chris Ware's work. It's been months since I have seen such a look of pure glee on his face. His mother is dying of cancer, and he's been very distracted. I think Ware's focus on family loss is one of the reasons my friend likes *The Acme Novelty Library* so much.

Your section on "The Ghost of Loneliness" triggered a lot of memories of what life was like for me in Chicago. The isolation was palpable, and the only relief was often long walks throughout the city at night. I'll never live there again.

—DAVID PAUTLER, HONOLULU, HAWAII

I have no trouble with you using the *comix@list* as a straw man, but I think the straw man itself was a kind of facile device used to ultimately dismiss criticism without really confronting it: You suggest that there's this cabal of elite comics fans and critics who don't get or want to get Chris' work, and are maybe just slaying a sacred cow, and while there may be an element of that, in my experience the reception of Chris' work has overall been even-handed but leaning towards the ecstatically positive. On "Members Only," there are only a few people who consistently criticize *The Acme Novelty Library,* and even they do it out of great respect for it and a desire to see it be better. Since you never try to present *The Imp* as objective journalism, though, it's not really much of a problem.

—MATT MADDEN, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

Reading this issue makes me aware of a certain nostalgic, painstaking, attention-to-detail-ridden aesthetic that you, Ware, Clowes, and even Prewitt and Brunetti all seem to share. Future art historians will probably label it "The Chicago School of Retro-Anality."

—PETER BAGGE, SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

I like how you alternate odd/even issues with high/low topics. (If that's just a coincidence, it should be your intent.)

You're about the only writer who can take an intellectual approach while still showing you're capable of just sitting down and enjoying comics. My only disappointment was that little attention was paid to the other strips Ware's done. I think even if Quimby, Potato Man, etc., were his only works, he would still be hailed as a genius. I'm curious about your mention of the "Whee!" school of cartooning. Is this something you made up just for this article or something you and others have thought about? Who belongs to this school? Me?

—SAM HENDERSON, NEW YORK, NEW YORK

An artist of Chris's caliber should be fully aware of the high degree of talent he possesses. Yet somehow, Chris can't see it clearly. He's like an incredibly beautiful woman who keeps telling you she's fat. The great thing about Chris, though, is that he is such a swell person.

—SETH, TORONTO, ONTARIO

I think the greatest failing of my strip (worse than the ragged linework throughout and the incorrect perspective in the "lumpy bald men" panel) is that I did not convey what your entire essay did convey: the emotional depth of Chris's work. By reducing his work to a series of visual mannerisms (for the sake of pastiche), I glossed over the subtleties and the seriousness of his art.

—IVAN BRUNETTI, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Shit, I miss Brunetti. Do me a favor? Give that sexy bear a hug for me? Thanks.

—DEAN HASPIEL, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

Another masterpiece… I've given up reading all comics "criticism" except for yours… The nitwits who write for "TCJ," for instance, are all insufferably dull and tasteless… Hey—how come Jenny Orrico never tried to be *my* intern? *I* need an intern.

—DANIEL CLOWES, OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA

I tried to start a letter to Daniel Clowes, but I just sounded so ridiculous, and it struck me that red paper was a really bad idea. In related news, I went home to Wisconsin last weekend and saw my uncle Tommy, the caricaturist. He was about to climb aboard a boat to draw caricatures for a wedding. He was wearing his sequined jacket, and of course he was perusing his careworn copy of *Caricature* for inspiration and will.

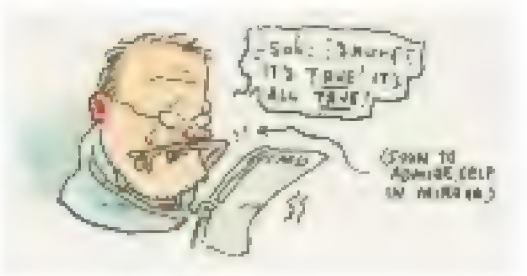
—JENNY ORRICO, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

I didn't really expect to read too much of the issue, to be honest, for I feared I'd find it too painful, depressing, etc., but I found myself shamefully devouring every word, not only because it was all about *me,* but mostly because it was so darn well done. Marnie, when reading through it, yelled to me from the living room, "This is amazing—he's got you totally pegged!"

You've done what most critics, I think, find the most difficult—writing about something you don't seem to hate, which, to me, is the only useful service that any "writing about writing" can perform.

You write from the vista of someone who knows what art is "for"—that it's not a means of "expressing ideas," or explicating "theories," but a way of creating a life or a sympathetic world for the mind to go to, however stupid that sounds. Fortunately, you're too good a writer to be a critic; in other words, you seem to have a real sense of what it is to be alive and desperate (one in the same, I think.)

—CHRIS WARE, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS



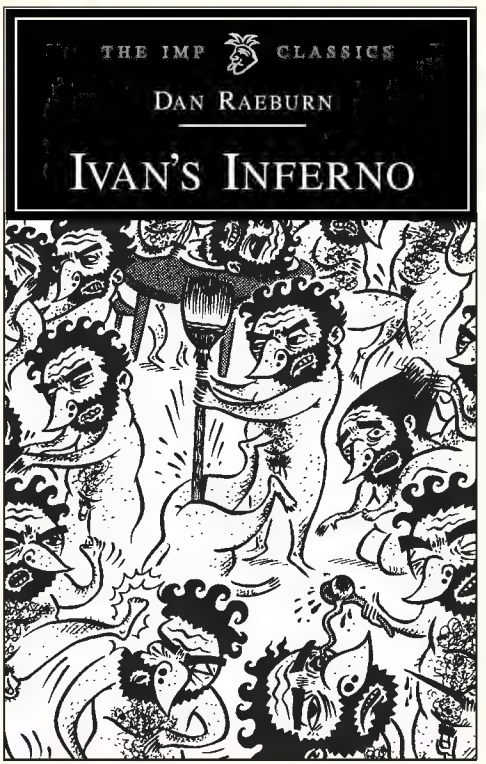
CONFESSION...

I am a lazy, lustful editor and I ABUSED my READERS

Erratum: In last issue's epigraph I misquoted Henry Louis Mencken. In Mencken's words (and in fact) Chicago is a "*gargantuan* and inordinate abbatoir," and not, as I wrote, a "*gigantic* and inordinate abbatoir." My apologies to the reader, to Mencken's ghost, and to my city of Chicago for this bobble.

Erratum: I also erroneously labeled Chris Ware a "bastard" in my last issue. Chris Ware was not born out of wedlock. He was born to both of his biological, married parents. I apologize for my lazy use of this epithet, and for any embarrassment this may have caused him and his family.

Erratum: Joshua Stancil #0594801 should not be in a "work camp." In addition, politicians should not corrupt the language with their lame, politically correct terms like "work camp." A chain gang is still a chain gang. However, Mr. Stancil should have *told* me not to print his letter. In addition, he should thank me for "hacking and editing" his letter as I did, because I removed many sentences from his anti-prison screed, including his very first sentence—"Greetings from Marion Correctional, the undisputed butt-crack of North Carolina!"—which would have earned him even harsher lashings from his enraged captors.



COMING SOON: THE IMP NO. 5

BRUNETTI'S COMPLETE WORKS FULLY EXPLICATED

By Perfesser Dan Raeburn
Chair of the Pornography Studies Department
The Chicago School of Retro-Anality

The cover features a detail from "I Think My Problem Is I'm All *Too* Sane," by Ivan Brunetti, from *Schizo* number 2. ©1996 Ivan Brunetti.

For Ladies Only

I focused on Perverse Souls in part because it is one of the few bisexual titles, but I must mention Mango's flagship title for the fairer sex, *Loves and Lovers*. Like most women's comics, it is printed in the brown and white *mediotono*, but the artwork is way above par and the stories are long and involved. And with titles like "My hubby left me 'cos I'm a drunk," "Dogs are better mothers than you," and "Money's the least of it if there's a good stud between my legs," what's not to like? Lots. The stories in *Loves and Lovers* are almost always written by Ricardo Rentería, Mango's in-house closet case. Let's hope the gals at *Bust, Bitch,* or *Jane* write about these.

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©Editorial Mango. Drawn by Ángel Mora, painted by Silva.

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WHAT IS "THE IMP?"

impío [eem-pee'o] *adj.* impious, godless, wicked, blasphemous.

implicar [eem-plee-kar'] *va.* & *n.* to involve, implicate, to contradict, oppose.

impolítico [eem-po-lee'tee-ko] *adj.* impolite.

importante [eem-por-tan'-tay] *adj.* important, urgent, weighty; serious.

importuno [eem-por-too'no] *adj.* importunate, troublesome, pressing, obtrusive.

imposible [eem-po-see'blay] *adj.* impossible, unfeasible, hopeless; **es —**, there isn't a chance, it can't be done.

impostura [eem-pos-too'ra] *f.* imposture, fraud, deceit; sham.

impotente [eem-po-ten'tay] *adj.* impotent, feeble, powerless.

impracticable [eem-prak-tee-ka'blay] *adj.* impracticable; impassable; not working.

imprecar [eem-pray-kar'] *va.* to curse.

impregnar [eem-preg-nar'] *va.* to impregnate; *vr.* to be pervaded, steeped; to be fraught (with).

imprenta [eem-pren'ta] *f.* printing (office), press; imprint; **libertad de —**, freedom of the press.

"Alternative."
—Spin—

"Whip-smart."
—The Voice Literary Supplement—

"A truly bizarre publication."
—The Seattle Stranger—

"Over-fawning and under-critical."
—geegaw.com—

"Scathing and mean-spirited."
—The Detroit Metro-Times—

"Highly recommended!"
—The Baffler—

"The protean, unpredictable whatzit of comics criticism."
—Yawp magazine—

"Psychoanalysis masquerading as criticism."
—The Comics Journal—

"A fake turn-of-the-century tabloid magazine, apparently drawing particular layout inspiration from *The Youth's Companion*, a boy's adventure-fiction magazine published in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by the Perry Mason Company of Boston."
—miscmedia.com—

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On this question economists, business leaders, and media analysts agree: you should always buy your Imps directly from me, the self-publisher. There are two reasons for this. First is greed. I make a modest profit on copies that I sell by mail. Second is reliability. When you order directly from me, I put you on my mailing list. That way I can notify you as soon as a new issue is available. You will always be the first kid on your block to have the latest issue, and you do not have to pester your local, grumpy comic book store clerk to order the damned thing. If signing a check and licking a stamp is just too "retro" for you, please purchase *The Imp* at one of the fine shops who generously support me. For your convenience and to fill up space I have organized these shops by regional stereotype and listed them on the following pages.

COWBOYS & INDIANS

La Ley del Revolver, *No. 179, Apr. 8, 1998. ©Editorial Mango. Written by Gami, drawn by Arturo Espinoza, inked by Manuel Martínez G.*

Southern California

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San Diego CA 92110
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Golden Apple
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Los Angeles CA 90046
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Hi-De-Ho Comics
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Santa Monica CA 90401
tel: (310) 394-2820

Meltdown Comics
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Los Angeles CA 90046
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Oregon

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Almas Perversas, *No. 222, Apr. 6, 2001. ©Editorial Mango. Written by Armando de la Roca, drawn by Garmaleón, inked by Rolando Martiarena.*

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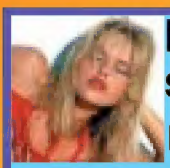

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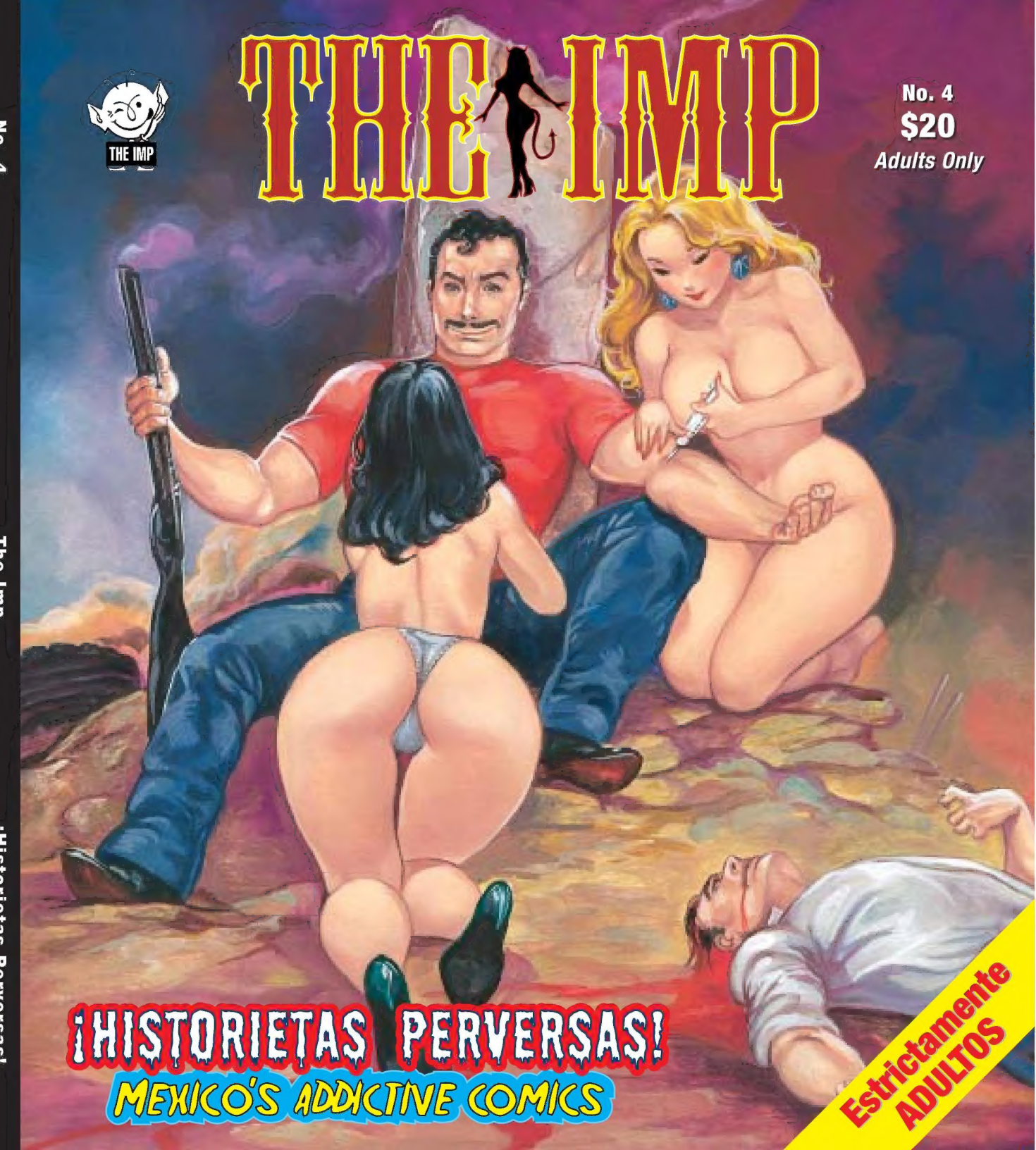
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